

WHAT'S NEXT? IMPROVING AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROGRAM FOR SOCIAL-  
EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Throughout my life, they have loved, supported, and encouraged me to live out my dreams and act in service to others. By pursuing my doctoral degree, I not only fulfilled a dream I have had for many years, but persevered in serving others by bringing wellness to a larger community.

In remembrance of the loved ones who have gone before us, I dedicate this work to my grandparents Luther and Grace, and to my father Richard. They always lifted me up, offered sound advice and wisdom, and believed in me.

In honor of my mother Alice, sister Katherine, and brother Stephen, I dedicate these pages to you and thank you for all the pastry-hikes, family dinners, and laughs that kept me going through the research and writing process.

To my son Josh and my daughter Arielle, I dedicate this focus on wellness to you. Together we have faced adversity, worked to grow and develop resiliency skills, and are stronger because of our trials. And, your patience, inspiration, and love have helped me to thrive through this doctoral journey.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to all those who have suffered adverse childhood experiences and strive to develop resilience, heal, and grow beyond their pain. I will continue to strive towards my big audacious goal of wellness for all—now and well into the future!

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## WHAT'S NEXT? IMPROVING AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROGRAM FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

### Abstract

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2020

Today's elementary school students face myriad traumatic issues including poverty, violence, physical and emotional abuse, homelessness, and parental substance abuse. These adverse childhood experiences are responsible for an increased risk of academic failure and behavioral problems in childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, provided through school and community partnerships, attempt to address these needs in both school-based and out-of-school-time (OST) learning settings. The purpose of this action research study was to examine one northern California-based nonprofit organization's OST SEL program for third through fifth grade students and determine actions and interventions for greater program effectiveness.

Students, parent/guardians, site administrators, school-staff, and community members engaged in focus groups, completed surveys, participated in validation groups, and acted as research associates throughout the iterative plan, act, observe, reflect action research cycle conducted during the winter of 2020. Qualitative data from focus group meetings included identified themes from authenticated and coded transcripts while quantitative data included descriptive statistical analysis of pre-program and end-of-program surveys. As the lead researcher for the study, I worked with action research participants to make program modifications and identify new actions for program improvement.

Based on themes and data trends, as well as the application of self-determination theory's basic psychological needs theory, findings demonstrate that student self-management skills improved during the 4-week action research cycle, as did their sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. At the same time, findings suggest additional growth opportunities in the areas of responsible decision-making and program improvement through development and implementation of integrated and universal SEL supports in classrooms, schools, families, and the larger community.

Linking the literature to these findings, recommendations for future action research cycles include age and developmental considerations regarding instruction and application of responsible decision-making skills, and integration of all five SEL competencies for greater harmonization of emotion and thought. To that end, the nonprofit organization's educational design team and I have begun redesigning the curriculum. Program modifications address child development of perceptual and higher-level memory and cognitive skills, and intentional integration of instruction and practice in all five SEL competencies throughout each program module. Teaching, combined with real-time application of planning and decision-making skills, will include opportunities for active role-playing, adult guidance, and experiences in which students learn and grow from mistakes.

In addition to student program modifications to build responsible decision-making skills, literature supports the call for universal SEL in the form of partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations for resource coordination resulting in more positive youth outcomes. Again working with the educational design team, the nonprofit organization and I have taken initial steps to establish a city wellness task force, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to partner in wellness for children and families in the community. We also

continue to iterate as we develop a community of practice for educators, focused on building SEL knowledge and practice.

By focusing on continuous improvement through an ongoing action research process, this study not only serves as an opportunity to celebrate successes, but highlight growth opportunities to advance the work of the northern California-based nonprofit organization and its programs. Utilizing study findings in combination with supporting literature, we are taking immediate action towards more positive outcomes for those we serve. This study also provides tools and guidance for other community partners in their design and implementation of effective SEL programs for the social and emotional well-being of elementary school students and families, and the communities in which they live.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACEs	adverse childhood experiences
ASPs	after-school programs
BPNT	basic psychological needs theory
BRFSS	Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning
K-12	kindergarten through grade 12
MTSS	multi-tiered system of supports
NCSL	National Conference of State Legislators
OST	out-of-school-time
PBIS	positive behavior interventions and supports
RULER	recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotion
SAFE	sequenced, active, focused, and explicit
SDT	self-determination theory
SEL	social-emotional learning

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Educators in districts nationwide try to grow young minds without considering the child's core—the experiences, feelings, and attitudes that make up each individual. When teachers see falling test scores, lack of engagement, bullying, violence, and other academic and behavioral problems at school, some dismiss these students as unteachable. If educators and community partners looked at the traumatic experiences our students face daily, and addressed their social-emotional learning needs, academic and behavioral outcomes would likely be very different.

Elementary school students often experience violence, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, poverty and residential instability, parental divorce and unemployment, and parental addictions (Bjrkensam et al., 2017; Dube et al., 2001; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2014). In fact, according to the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health, just under 50% of American children are impacted by at least one of these adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Sacks et al., 2014). These children are at significant risk of developing academic and behavioral problems that may be responsible for a myriad of mental health outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (Chapman et al., 2007).

Research suggests that students with increased rates of ACE exposure have greater rates of academic failure, attendance problems, and behavioral challenges in school (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). Academic challenges include failure to meet grade-level standards in reading, writing, or math. In fact, researchers report that students who experienced ACEs fell as many as 12 months behind their peers in reading and numeracy skills (Mundy et al., 2017). As compared to children without any reported ACEs, those with more than two are 2.67 times more likely to be retained in school (Bethell et al., 2014). Furthermore, researchers associate negative reading

achievement and attendance with children who experienced the specific ACE-related risks of displacement, homelessness, maltreatment, and neglect (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Students with ACEs tend to experience a greater number and frequency of internalizing and externalizing behaviors that negatively impact school engagement. Internalizing behaviors include sadness and worrying, social separation and other anxieties, depression, negative mood and low self-esteem, inability to trust, and higher rates of insecure-avoidant attachment style or resistance to development of emotional investments in others (Burlew et al., 2013; Overstreet & Matthews, 2011). Externalizing behaviors include academic problems, disruptive and delinquent behavior, aggression, impulsivity, oppositionality, and drug and alcohol experimentation or abuse (Burlew et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2016; Overstreet & Mathews, 2011).

These internalizing and externalizing behaviors and other ACE-related risks may be reduced through social-emotional learning (SEL) programs implemented in both school-based and out-of-school-time (OST) learning settings. According to CASEL (2017), children develop five key social-emotional competencies through SEL program participation: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Participation in SEL programs can positively impact academic and behavioral performance. In a meta-analysis of 213 studies including 270,000 students, researchers found that students participating in SEL programs showed 11% gains in academic performance as well as other significant positive changes in behavioral and emotional conduct (The Pennsylvania State University, 2017).

In response to SEL research and the growing needs of California students, the California Department of Education (CDE) developed a set of Guiding Principles for SEL. The principles are listed as follows:

1. Adopt Whole Child Development as the Goal of Education
2. Commit to Equity
3. Build Capacity
4. Partner with Families and Communities
5. Learn and Improve (CDE, 2018a).

The CDE encourages school districts to use these principles when developing local control and accountability plan goals and planning for Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) implementation and professional development (CDE, 2018b).

Among the five Guiding Principles (CDE, 2018a), 4 and 5 specifically refer to development of school, family, and community partnerships and progress monitoring as critical components of effective program implementation. For more positive youth outcomes, the CDE (2018a) suggests that schools work toward shared goal implementation through OST, summer learning, and other partnership programs to leverage capacity and collaborate across a larger cross-sector of youth-serving agencies. In addition, programs must be measured for implementation quality and student outcomes, and metrics used for planning and decision-making.

In direct response to CDE (2018a) Guiding Principles 4 and 5, my son and I—working to address our own ACEs by disrupting the status quo of mental health and wellness in our community—established a nonprofit organization and work with key stakeholders to implement OST SEL programs in partnership with several northern California elementary schools. These programs provide students in grades three through five instruction and practice in the five social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL (2017). As part of ongoing measurement and refinement processes, and to greater meet the social-emotional needs of student participants, this

study contributed to continuous program improvement and the organizational goal of strengthening impact for students in need.

### **Problem of Practice**

Today's elementary school students face an array of traumatic issues such as poverty, violence, physical and emotional abuse, homelessness, and parental substance abuse. These ACEs are responsible for an increased risk of academic failure and behavioral problems. SEL programs, provided through school and community partnerships, attempt to address these needs in both school-based and OST learning settings.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this action research study was to examine one northern California-based nonprofit organization's OST program designed to teach SEL competencies, and to determine actions and interventions leading to greater program effectiveness.

### **Research Question/Inquiry Stance**

Within the context of the OST SEL program for third through fifth grade students, what actions and interventions might be implemented for greater program effectiveness with regard to CASEL's recommendations that programs be sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) (CASEL, 2013)?

### **Significance of the Inquiry**

There currently exists a vast amount of research on school-based SEL programs and their effectiveness. In fact, CASEL (2013) created a guidebook of evidence-based programs designed for schoolwide implementation. However, there is significantly less research relating to community partners and their provision of OST learning programs for development of SEL, academic, and behavioral outcomes. The CDE, in its establishment of its Guiding Principles,

indicates that the development of community partnerships is an essential component to the advancement of SEL in California's students (CDE, 2018a).

### **Methods**

This study spotlighted one OST SEL program implemented in a northern California elementary school. First piloted at the research site in the fall of 2018, the program underwent several changes during the first two years of informal action research cycles focused on program improvement. The formal action research study described here commenced during the winter of 2020 and continued the next iterative plan, act, observe, reflect cycle initiated during the development of the OST SEL program (McNiff, 2017; Stringer, 2014). In this phase students, teachers, administrators and staff, parent/guardians, and outside community members participated in guiding the inquiry based on design and improvement of the OST SEL program in reference to CASEL's (2013) recommended SAFE characteristics of effectiveness.

According to CASEL (2013), these SAFE characteristics define effective programs as sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Referring to each letter of the SAFE acronym, researchers suggest that students experience positive SEL outcomes when program implementation includes sequenced or progressive instruction. Additionally, programs are more effective when participants actively engage in learning, with opportunities to practice new SEL skills and strategies both within the program and real-life settings. Finally, effective SEL programs focus on specific and explicit skill development and are targeted in nature (Durlak et al., 2011).

Utilizing action research to examine the development of student SEL competencies as well as CASEL's (2013) SAFE features within the OST SEL program, interventions taken as part of the cyclical study design led to program modifications and refinements. These

modifications contributed to implementation of a more effective OST SEL program for current and future participants, recommendations for subsequent action research cycles, and guidance for the nonprofit organization in planning for expansion to other school sites within the community and beyond. Results may also be utilized by other community partners in their development and refinement of SEL programs implemented in OST learning settings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to self-determination theory (SDT), humans tend to exhibit curiosity and self-motivation. When their basic psychological needs are met, they experience well-being that pushes them to extend their learning and live to their fullest capacity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, individuals—and students in particular—may reject learning, growth, and responsibility based on a variety of internal and external conditions. While researchers identify factors such as ACEs that contribute to reduced academic achievement and behavioral problems, additional studies highlight critical components that optimize children’s development, performance, and well-being (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003).

In order to examine the findings from this study, an SDT sub-theory, basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), provided the theoretical framework. Developed by psychologists at the University of Rochester, SDT provides guidance for the study of human motivation and personality and proposes that individuals have innate psychological needs pertaining to competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It postulates that a learning environment which fosters these needs optimizes individual functioning and growth and highlights the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in either encouraging or discouraging engagement in positive behaviors (Van Sluys, 2010).



Because SDT proposes that children thrive in those settings that address their social and emotional needs, as the lead researcher, I utilized this framework as part of the action research cycle and engaged student participants to work alongside adults to build a more effective OST SEL program. While the program curriculum focuses on the five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017), action research participants and I examined the SDT and BPNT-related elements of competence, relatedness, and autonomy in student development of positive social behavior and reduced conduct problems (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I discuss this theoretical framework in greater detail in Chapter 2, and apply it to the methodology, findings, and discussion in the remaining chapters.

### **Delimitations**

As highlighted in CDE (2018a) Guiding Principle 4, I maintained a primary focus on the community partnership component of SEL program implementation. The scope of this study, therefore, does not include actions pertaining to school-based SEL programs implemented at the research site. Instruction in campus-wide behavioral expectations, and the behavior prevention and reinforcement systems supported through positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) and MTSS, are therefore considered independent of the action research study.

Critical to the action research study was the role of student participants. Ranging in grade-level from third through fifth, student participants either attended the program in the past two years or enrolled in the program during the action research cycle. These intermediate elementary students not only had experience with the program, but also demonstrated a level of maturity allowing for more significant contributions to the research process.

This level of maturity might also indicate a greater likelihood of emotional/behavioral disorders resulting from higher numbers and frequencies of ACEs. Research suggests that ACEs

such as trauma exposure can be a common, chronic experience for many children, especially in the case of multiple, co-occurring types of trauma (Duplechain et al., 2008; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Overstreet & Matthews, 2011). These intermediate elementary school-aged students may therefore have been more responsive to SEL program instruction yielding more thoughtful and comprehensive data to inform the research study.

Teachers, site administrators, and school staff also participated in the action research study. Within the school community, teachers, administrators and staff interact with students daily not only in individual classrooms, but on the playground, in the lunchroom and beyond. With the opportunity to observe, reflect upon, and support students with SEL skills and practices these teachers, administrators, and staff contributed to the study as they participated in focus groups, responded to surveys, and shared information based on their daily experiences.

Parent/guardians of student participants who previously attended, or who enrolled in the winter 2020 session, enriched the action research process based on several factors: relationships with their own children and families, engagement in the nonprofit organization's complementary parent/guardian programs, interactions and communications with the program facilitator team, and home practice of SEL skills taught in the program. Parents/guardians participated in focus groups during the action research process.

Finally, community members provided an outside perspective to the action research process. Community members included a businesswoman, mental health professional, member of a local non-profit organization that supports child and family wellness, district curriculum coach, and friends interested in making change. Because of the positionality I maintained as the lead researcher—an insider working collaboratively with other insiders—community members

from outside of the research setting provided for inclusion of diverse perspectives as well as potential reduction of bias.

### **Key Terms**

In order to better understand the background, related literature, Guiding Principles, programs reviewed, and population in this study, I used the following terminology and definitions.

*Action research:* Different from traditional positivist research models focused on objectivity, rationality, and quantitative data, action research challenges existing organizational norms by relying on democratic processes that engage researchers to question, act, and reflect to address research questions relating to the values, culture, and history of the community under study (Coghlan & Casey, 2001; Weiner, 2004). Action research involves multiple iterative cycles that allow for understanding, improvement, or social reform (Pritchard, 2002).

*Action research team:* The action research team was comprised of the lead researcher, validation group, and research associates. These team members examined data, challenged preconceptions, and critically reflected on the study's findings. They identified potential program modifications and considered implications for future research cycles.

*Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):* Stressful or traumatic events that strongly relate to the development of health problems throughout a person's life. ACEs include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, intimate partner violence and violence to parents, family substance misuse and mental illness, parental separation or divorce, and incarceration of a household member (Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019; Felitti et al., 1998; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013).

*Autonomy*: The individual's perception of an internal locus of causality or ability to self-regulate.

It includes choice, control over one's actions, and a sense of congruency between one's actions, values, and beliefs (Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017).

*Basic psychological needs theory (BPNT)*: One of six SDT sub-theories, BPNT posits that humans experience well-being when they experience satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*California's Social and Emotional Learning Guiding Principles*: Intended to inform and support strong SEL practice across the state, these can be utilized in the development of local control and accountability plan goals, MTSS implementation, designing professional learning, curricula adoption, assessment, and building collaboration among stakeholders (CDE, 2018a). The principles include:

1. Adopt whole child development as the goal of education.
2. Commit to equity.
3. Build capacity.
4. Partner with families and communities.
5. Learn and improve (CDE, 2018a).

*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)*: An organization developed and dedicated to researching and supporting the implementation of SEL standards and programs (CASEL, 2020).

*Competence:* An individual's belief in his or her abilities, including one's sense of mastery and effectiveness and the ability to effectively interact with the environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017).

*Lead researcher:* The author and primary researcher in the action research study; the lead researcher attains institutional review board (IRB) certification, site approval, conducts surveys and focus groups, advances the action research cycle through informal iterations as well as the formal study, works with the validation groups and research associates, and authors the dissertation (Heron, 1996).

*Local control and accountability plan:* A goal-setting tool for schools and districts to create action plans and leverage resources for student improvement (CDE, 2018a).

*Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS):* A framework focusing on the Common Core State Standards and instruction, differentiated and student-centered learning, individualized student needs, and alignment of student academic, behavioral, and social support systems (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [CPBIS], 2017).

*Out-of-school-time (OST):* A term used to define those supervised programs attended regularly by youth outside of the traditional school day. These include programs that occur either before or after school on the school campus or in other facilities and provide academic, enrichment, sports, or other activities for school-aged children (CDC, 2019).

*Participants:* Students, teachers/staff and administrators, parents/guardians, and community members who provided feedback and responses to surveys and focus group prompts, worked with the lead researcher to analyze data and challenge assumptions and collaborated in the action research process (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stringer, 2014).

*Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS):* An approach for school adoption and organization of evidence-based behavioral interventions to enhance academic and social behavior outcomes for all students (CPBIS, 2017).

*Relatedness:* The development and maintenance of friendships and close personal relationships, including group belonging, connectedness, and feelings of significance (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017).

*Relationship skills:* One of the five broad SEL competencies defined by CASEL, this discrete set of subskills includes effective communication, social engagement and collaboration, relationship building, support-seeking, resisting social pressures, and teamwork (CASEL, 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2017).

*Responsible decision-making:* This competency includes subskills associated with identification, reflection, evaluation, and analysis of problems and situations, and ethical responsibility (CASEL, 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2017).

*RStudio:* An open source data analysis software that provides an integrated development environment for statistical computations and graphics (RStudio, 2020).

*Self-awareness:* A broad SEL competency, this includes subskills related to identification of one's emotions, thoughts, values, and strengths, self-confidence and efficacy, and development of accurate self-perception (CASEL, 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2017).

*Self-determination theory (SDT):* Developed by researchers at the University of Rochester, this theory proposes that children thrive in settings that address their social and emotional needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Self-management:* This SEL competency includes skills associated with the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors for impulse control, stress management, self-

discipline and motivation, goal-setting, and organization (CASEL, 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2017).

*Social awareness*: The SEL competency that includes skills associated with perspective-taking, empathy, appreciation and respect for diverse peoples and cultures, and understanding and adherence to social and ethical norms for behavior (CASEL, 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2017).

*Social-emotional competencies*: The term used to define an individual's ability to effectively apply discrete social-emotional skills within the appropriate context. As defined by CASEL (2017), these competencies include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

*Social-emotional learning (SEL)*: The process through which individuals learn and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2017).

*Social-emotional skills*: A discrete set of subskills required to perform social-emotional tasks and solve problems. These 12 subskills fall into five broad categories or SEL competencies.

### **Chapter Summary**

Elementary school students suffer from anxiety, trauma, poverty, parental substance abuse, and a variety of other ACEs. These, in turn, may cause behavioral and academic problems that impact learning and lead to mental health issues in adolescence and adulthood. The CDE, in response to the growing need for SEL in schools, developed a set of Guiding Principles for those serving California youth. Emphasized in these principles are the need for community partnerships, and measurement and evaluation of SEL programs (CDE, 2018a).

By utilizing an action research design, the primary goal of this study was to collect iterative feedback and determine actions and interventions that would lead to greater effectiveness of an OST SEL program in the elementary school context. Findings, including identified actions and interventions, are relevant specifically to the nonprofit organization's educational design team, program facilitators, and board of directors in program refinement and potential expansion to other schools and districts. In addition, the study contributes to existing literature on SEL programs implemented by community partners for elementary school students within an OST learning setting and provides guidance to others interested in establishing similar programs.

With a curriculum and instructional focus on the five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017), this study examined an OST SEL program through the lens of BPNT and student development of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Through involvement in the OST SEL program and participation in the action research study, students had the opportunity to contribute not only to the study, but to their overall well-being as they learned and practiced different ways of thinking, working, and being (Strack et al., 2004). The proceeding literature review provides additional information regarding ACEs and their relation to mental health and well-being, the theoretical framework, SEL competencies, and features of effective OST SEL programs for elementary school children.



## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

ACEs are responsible for a great number of academic, physical, psychological, and behavioral outcomes in youth, adolescents, and adults. Abuse, neglect, and household challenges ranging from living with a substance abusing family member to witnessing violence, can have long-lasting negative effects. To mitigate and possibly prevent these negative outcomes, SEL programs, set both within and outside of the traditional school day, strive to build social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) students (CASEL, 2017). This review synthesizes ACE-related literature, provides evidence of ACE impact, and describes the features of effective SEL programs directed at preventing ongoing ACE-related challenges.

Designed specifically to address ACE-related challenges through explicit SEL instruction and practice, this action research study focused on a northern California-based OST program for elementary school students. With the research stance directed at program improvement, I worked with the action research team to examine, design, and implement practices leading to more effective OST SEL programming. In addition to discussion of literature related to effective programming, this review includes examination of several theories that have been applied to the study of SEL programs, and features BPNT as the theoretical framework guiding the research. Finally, it includes a historical foundation of action research in order to build understanding and validation for use of this methodology in the research setting.

## ACEs

According to the CDC (2019), ACEs are potentially traumatic experiences that may occur in youth under the age of 18 years. Grouped into three main categories—abuse, neglect, and household challenges—these experiences may contribute to both proximal and long-lasting negative outcomes from childhood into adulthood (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; CDC, 2019). Physical and mental health challenges, risky behavior, and diminished educational and occupational opportunities are more likely to occur based on the number and frequency of ACEs (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; CDC, 2019; Felitti et al., 1998).

Within the three larger ACE categories, researchers identify 10 specific experiences that based on dosage (number and frequency of occurrence), lead to greater risk in children as they grow and develop into adolescence and adulthood (CDC, 2019). The first of these three categories—abuse—includes emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. While emotional abuse can involve swearing, insults, and put-downs, physical abuse involves any act that causes physical harm, and sexual abuse includes fondling and other sexual activity imposed by another (CDC, 2019). Neglect is based on a lack of emotional love and support, physical care, and protection. Finally, household challenges include a child's witness to or experience of a household member's participation in violence, substance abuse, mental illness, separation or divorce, and incarceration. Figure 1 displays the 10 identified ACEs.











Abuse	Neglect	Household Dysfunction	
Physical 	Physical 	Mental Illness 	Incarcerated Relative 
Emotional 	Emotional 	Mother Treated Violently 	Substance Abuse 
Sexual 		Divorce 	

Figure 1. The 10 types of ACEs (adapted from Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, 2013).

Foundational to ACE-related research is the joint adult ACE study conducted by Kaiser Permanente in collaboration with the CDC (Felitti et al., 1998). Recognizing the influence of single types of abuse on adult medical problems, researchers sought to address a gap in the literature by questioning the combined influence of multiple ACE categories (Felitti et al., 1998). Looking at seven of the 10 currently recognized ACEs, these researchers examined their potential impact on adult health status, health risk behaviors, and disease. Utilizing a large sample size of 8,506 male and female adults with a mean age of 56.1 years, researchers collected ACE questionnaire data in two waves between 1995 and 1997 (Felitti et al., 1998).

In analysis of the data, 52% of respondents reported having one or more ACEs and 6.2% reported four or more (Felitti et al., 1998). Researchers found not only a strong and cumulative relationship between ACEs and adult health status, but also a strong dose-response relationship between the number of ACEs and disease conditions such as cancer and heart disease, health risk

behaviors such as smoking and drug abuse, and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression (Felitti et al., 1998). While the original ACE study comprised a predominantly White middle-class population with health insurance, the data have strong implications for those representing disenfranchised groups.

Utilized across the United States annually, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) collects data addressing questions related to demographics and ACE-related risk factors (CDC, 2019; Merrick et al., 2018). This random telephone survey generates information regarding health conditions, health-related behaviors, and preventative services used by adults. In a study conducted between 2011 and 2014, researchers collected BRFSS data—including responses to ACE questions related to child abuse, neglect, and household challenges—from respondents in 23 states. While findings from this larger and more diverse population closely align with those of the original ACE study, they also highlight the higher prevalence of ACEs among particular subgroups. Individuals from diverse racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds reported significantly higher numbers and frequencies of ACEs than comparison groups (CDC, 2019; Merrick et al., 2018).

While both the BRFSS ACE and Kaiser-CDC joint studies utilized adult respondents, recent research focuses on children. Using data from the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health to examine ACEs like those identified in the adult study, one key child-centered study included national and state-level data on a representative sample of children birth to 17 years of age (Bethell et al., 2014). Utilizing statistical models, researchers examined whether specific subgroups were more or less likely to have experienced ACEs and whether these predict physical and emotional risks, resilience, and school success. Similar to results from

the adult ACE study, researchers found a dose-response effect; children with two or more ACEs were more likely to have negative physical and mental health outcomes.

Results from similar studies focused on child maltreatment and its impact on health outcomes in adolescents demonstrate the association of timing and exposure to ACEs with negative health outcomes. Utilizing a longitudinal design, researchers collected data from interviews of 933 children at ages four, six, eight, 12, and 14. Taking into account each child's race/ethnicity, family income, and marital status of the caregiver, they examined participant responses in relation to maltreatment and household dysfunction (Flaherty et al., 2013). Findings are consistent with those of the adult ACE study; there is a strong relationship between number of ACEs and negative health outcomes. Furthermore, recent ACE exposure in adolescents is more predictive of negative health outcomes than exposure during other developmental stages.

### **ACE Impact**

Within their first six years of life, approximately 27% of American children experience three ACEs while 42% may experience four or more (Freeman, 2014). Because the likelihood of negative outcomes increases with the number of ACEs, these children more frequently experience academic, psychological, and behavioral challenges (Bethell et al., 2014). Identified as internalizing and externalizing behaviors, these challenges may manifest in childhood and worsen throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

**Internalizing behaviors.** Referring to a child's emotional or psychological state, internalizing behaviors are those directed inward and include depressive and anxiety disorders as well as physical or somatic complaints. According to researchers, children with three ACEs were 4.7 times more likely and children with four or more ACEs were almost five times more likely to have internalizing problems as compared to children with no ACEs (Freeman, 2014).

These behaviors may manifest as social and separation anxieties, negative mood and self-esteem, inability to trust, and post-traumatic stress disorder in children (Anda et al., 2002; Burlew et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2011; Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Peleg-Oren et al., 2008; Raitasalo & Holmila, 2017). Examining the relationship between ACEs, internalizing behaviors, and lifetime histories of depressive disorders as well as recent depressive disorders, researchers found that exposure to ACEs increases risk of depressive disorders as many as four decades after their occurrence (Chapman et al., 2004). Noting an association between ACEs and suicide attempts, research also suggests an increased suicide risk regardless of ACE type and that the number of ACEs strongly correlates to suicide attempts in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Choi et al., 2017).

While not all children with ACEs demonstrate suicidal ideation or attempted suicide, because of an often-restricted social life due to the traumatic environment they endure, many tend to experience challenging interpersonal relationships and withdrawal from peer and other support groups (Burlew et al., 2013; Peleg-Oren et al., 2008). In addition, these children tend to demonstrate excessive responsibility, compliance and guilt, and rationalize the behavior of others (Peleg-Oren et al., 2008). Issues may progress into adulthood as these individuals feel weak and experience impaired emotional and social functioning which may be related to attachment styles. Hypothesizing that attachment styles stay constant throughout life, researchers suggest that children with insecure attachment may experience challenges developing trustworthy and healthy interpersonal relationships (Peleg-Oren et al., 2008).

To examine these internalizing behaviors and the risk for developing one of three attachment disorders, researchers examined the impact of several ACEs on children. Looking specifically at parental substance abuse, researchers studied the relationship between children of

substance abusing fathers and their attachment. Using a sample size of 148 elementary-aged children, they found that these children demonstrated increased rates of insecure-avoidant attachment style. Due partially to the absence of a caring parent figure, and to the unpredictable family relationships they experience, children possessing this style tend to acquire avoidance strategies as well as strategies for detachment from negative feelings (Peleg-Oren et al., 2008). Additionally, these children experience externalizing behaviors related to substance use disorder in later adolescence and adulthood.

In addition to parental substance abuse, researchers found an association between environmental factors including parental separation, violence, poverty, and abuse with increased risk for internalizing behaviors, such as depression. Studying behavior problems in a racially, economically, and socially diverse sampling of over 3,000 children, these researchers utilized a longitudinal design to examine the impact of eight ACE categories including emotional and physical abuse and neglect, parental domestic violence and mental illness, and incarceration of a family member (Hunt et al., 2017). Results suggest a strong association between ACE exposure and both internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children at 9 years of age (Hunt et al., 2017). Additionally, parental anxiety and depression consistently predicted each of the five behavioral outcomes studied: ADHD diagnoses, clinical internalizing and externalizing, and total internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

**Externalizing behaviors.** While more challenging to identify internalizing behaviors in children, externalizing behaviors are those directed outward; the child acts negatively on the external environment. These include aggression, delinquency, and hyperactivity in children and crime and violence in adulthood (Liu, 2004). According to researchers, children with four or more ACEs were 3.75 times more likely than children with no ACEs to exhibit externalizing

behaviors (Freeman, 2014). ACE exposure contributes to lower school engagement and greater likelihood of repeating a grade in school (Bethell et al., 2014; Burlew et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2016; Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Schroeder et al., 2006; Weinstock, 2017). In addition to academic challenges within the school setting, these children may be disruptive, aggressive, impulsive, and oppositional (Burlew et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2016; Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Schroeder et al., 2006). They are also more likely to experience incarceration, poverty, and substance abuse in adolescence and adulthood (Anda et al., 2002; Bartos, 2016; Metzler et al., 2017; Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Peleg-Oren et al., 2008; Raitasalo & Holmila, 2017).

Looking at ACE risks associated with parental substance abuse, researchers found that children who live with addicts are at risk for developing substance use disorders with “2- to 4-fold increase” for those reporting both parents as substance abusers (Parolin et al., 2016, para. 7). In fact, millions of children worldwide live with drug or alcohol abusers and are at greater risk of developing alcohol problems in adulthood (Anda et al., 2002; Parolin et al., 2016). Research shows that drug addicts exposed as children to parental substance abusers, either biologically or environmentally, tend to exhibit clinical anxiety and depression (Parolin et al., 2016). Although findings demonstrate that children who grow up in homes with substance abusers are more likely to experience depression and later alcoholism, they also experience more ACEs, leading researchers to consider the role of ACEs in later addiction (Anda et al., 2002).

Studying the impact of ACEs, researchers note a strong relationship between having alcohol-abusing parents and the reported number of ACEs (Anda et al., 2002). However, they found that the prevalence of depression and alcoholism relates more to traumas experienced than to the addiction of a parent (Anda et al., 2002). Traumas such as childhood neglect, abuse, and the mental health issues associated with parental substance abusers all contribute to a greater



number and diversity of ACEs that can lead to adolescent and adult alcoholism and depression. Researchers assert, however, that there is not an exclusive association between a greater number of ACEs and parental addiction (Anda et al., 2002). Rather, factors such as childhood environment, parenting competence, household dysfunction, parental incarceration, and other ACEs also contribute to later substance abuse (Parolin et al., 2016; Tilson, 2018). From this single example of parental addiction, researchers note a strong relationship to other ACEs, providing a lens through which to view additional, perhaps interdependent, trauma-related outcomes.

### **The Case for SEL**

With the prevalence of ACEs in today's youth, research directs practitioners towards early screening, intervention, and establishment of preventative programs to build resilience in at-risk children (Bethell et al., 2014; Flaherty et al., 2013; Freeman, 2014; Liu et al., 2011). While there is no substitute for intensive mental health therapy conducted by a trained professional, implementation of wellness practices through evidence-based SEL programs in schools, homes, and communities may potentially enhance the well-being of American children and lead to long-lasting improvements in their lives (Bethell et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 2017). SEL programs can provide children with safe, nurturing, stable relationships and environments in which they can learn tools to address ACE-related challenges and alleviate their effects (Merrick et al., 2018).

### **What is SEL?**

Early contributors to the field of SEL referred to competence as a developmental construct. Waters and Sroufe (1983), for example, defined social competence as an individual's ability "to make use of the environmental and personal resources to achieve a good

developmental outcome” (p. 81). Elaborating upon this definition, resources include those within both the environment and the individual. Those resources within the environment include interactions with and integration into peer groups as well as the ability to coordinate one’s behavior, while resources within the individual include personality and motivational constructs such as self-esteem and self-concept (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). Within this definition of competence is the construct of good developmental outcomes including both ultimate criteria, which refers to “health or adaptation into adulthood,” and proximate criteria which refers to those outcomes that occur during the course of development (Waters & Sroufe, 1983, p. 83).

Building upon these early foundational elements of social competence, CASEL (2017) defined SEL as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (para. 1). The CASEL framework for systemic SEL highlights five key competencies to be developed across school district, sites and classrooms, families, and the broader community. These five competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2017).

With a similar focus to CASEL’s (2017) SEL framework, The Aspen Institute—an international think tank and nonprofit organization dedicated to finding solutions to public policy issues—published *From a Nation at Risk to A Nation at Hope* (2017) to address the need for social-emotional and academic instruction for whole child growth and development (The Aspen Institute, 2020). According to this and other related reports, SEL comprises approximately 12 discrete subskills that can be grouped into three integrated domains: cognitive skills, emotional competencies, and social and interpersonal skills (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Cognitive skills include

executive functions, as well as an individual's beliefs and attitudes that guide learning.

Emotional competencies include self-management and self-awareness. Social and interpersonal skills include conflict resolution, teamwork, and empathy. While The Aspen Institute's (2017) definition of SEL closely aligns to that of CASEL, the concept of social, emotional, and academic development builds upon the foundation that schooling can provide instruction and nurturing in all three skill domains through an integrated approach (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

### **State Initiatives and Standards**

Although research supports the implementation of SEL in American schools, according to the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), SEL measures have been slow to pass. To date, only one state has enacted legislation to establish an SEL work group, and a second state now requires SEL training for school personnel. However, all 50 states now have SEL standards for preschool, eight have standards for early elementary, and another eight have standards that extend K-12 (NCSL, 2018).

While California does have preschool SEL standards, there are no statewide SEL standards for K-12. In lieu of standards, the CDE (2018a) released its set of Guiding Principles in the spring of 2018. Informed by both The Aspen Institute's (2017) consensus statement and CASEL's (2017) definition of SEL, the five principles provide guidance for districts, schools, families, and community partners to support SEL instruction and practice across the state. The principles include the adoption of "whole child development, commit[ment] to equity, build[ing] capacity, partner[ships] with families and community," and "learn[ing] and improve[ment]" (CDE, 2018a, p. 1). Each of the five principles further delineates the need to address educational systems, climate and culture, developmental standards, professional development, expanded learning, progress monitoring, and other critical SEL implementation features.

## **SEL Programs**

While the case for SEL is compelling, several researchers question the findings regarding effectiveness of such programs. Durlak et al. (2011) for example, noted that several studies of after-school programs (ASPs) targeted only students with preexisting behavioral, emotional, or academic problems. These studies, therefore, cannot be generalized to all populations. Additionally, much of the research neglects to disaggregate demographic data by race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status. As Durlak et al. (2011) explained, meta-analysis data do not provide information regarding a causal relationship between recommended program features such as those identified by the SAFE acronym and program effectiveness.

Other researchers note methodological flaws and an overall lack of rigor in studies of SEL (Zeidner et al., 2002). Additionally, these researchers question the role of biology and environment, dosage, fidelity of implementation, teacher training, and intervention strategies in the development of SEL competencies. As researchers suggest, “even when we find common factors across programs, we may not be able to pinpoint which of them matter most” (McClelland et al., 2017, p. 43). Despite these questions, these same researchers acknowledge the importance of SEL and the development of school-based, after-school, and OST programs to address students’ social-emotional needs (Durlak et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2017; Zeidner, et al., 2002). Effective programs must therefore include consideration of demographic features, program dosage, duration, skill training of program leaders, adherence to SAFE recommendations, and methodological rigor (Durlak et al., 2010).

**School-based SEL programs.** The integration of SEL programs into schoolwide tiered frameworks such as MTSS and PBIS has yielded positive outcomes in school climate and culture, and academic performance (Barnett, 2019; Eber et al., 2009; CPBIS, 2017; Reinbergs &

Fefer, 2017). Through these frameworks school leaders define, enforce, and positively acknowledge student social competencies and behavior expectations to support all children in improved educational and mental health outcomes. Additionally, data-based decision-making informs interventions to match student needs at each tier. Tier I support occurs in the general education setting and provides universal prevention for all students. Tier II support provides short-term interventions to small groups of students identified to be at risk for behavioral or mental health issues. Tier III interventions include more intensive supports for individual students. These may include counseling, trauma-informed practices, or additional mental health interventions (Barnett, 2019; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2017).

Designed primarily for universal prevention at Tier I, much of the nation's K-12 educators have access to evidence-based SEL curriculum. These curricula offer lesson plans and direct instructional supports for systematic implementation by classroom teachers within the course of the school day. In addition, they offer multi-year programming and practice opportunities for students to fully develop social-emotional skills and strategies. High quality SEL instruction includes training and implementation supports for teachers and ongoing evaluation of program impact on student behavioral and academic performance (CASEL, 2013).

**After-school and OST SEL programs.** While there is extensive research and critical analysis of in-school SEL program effectiveness, less widely studied are after-school and OST programs. However, in a large-scale meta-analysis of ASPs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents, researchers examined program effectiveness in strengthening these skills. With previous studies of ASPs focused on academic outcomes, this meta-analysis was the first to include systematic examination of personal and social effects.

Including 75 reports of 69 ASPs, all programs included comparison to control groups, emphasized personal or social skill development, and addressed youth five to 18 years of age.

Additionally, researchers coded data for the presence of SAFE program features; programs needed to be sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Findings suggest that these ASPs had a statistically significant impact on participant feelings and attitudes as well as on behavioral and academic outcomes. Researchers also found a positive correlation between ASPs possessing SAFE features and the promotion of social and personal well-being in participating youth (Durlak et al., 2010).

Drawing upon findings from the previous meta-analysis, researchers sought to identify specific features of effective OST programs and their relation to school-based SEL curriculum (Jones, Bailey et al., 2017). OST refers to those supervised programs that occur on school campuses outside of the traditional school day: before school, after-school, enrichment, sports, and other extracurricular programs. In a comprehensive report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, authors examined 25 OST-specific programs and their key features related to program and skill focus, grade range, and other unique characteristics. Based on this analysis, The Foundation identified four guidelines and five key considerations for OST organizations when adapting curriculum and making other SEL programming decisions. Guidelines include provision of a safe environment that supports development of positive relationships, developmentally appropriate and engaging instruction, and direct implementation of SEL skill-building. Researchers suggested that OST organizations also consider the need for programs to be differentiated, additive, supportive of the organization's mission, and inclusive of student needs and learning styles (Jones, Bailey et al., 2017).

Emphasizing an achievement model in development of the whole-child, these researchers identified both large and small-scale effective OST SEL programs. Two of these, RULER and WINGS, provided models for the design and implementation of the northern California-based nonprofit organization's OST SEL program highlighted in this study. These programs, built on research and evidence, successfully support student participants in SEL skill-building and practice.

**RULER.** Developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, RULER is an acronym for students recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotion (Reyes et al., 2012). Guiding the RULER approach is a theoretical framework which posits that these skills are critical for the development of emotional literacy, climate, academics, relationships, positive youth development, and well-being (RULER, 2019). Implementation of the RULER approach involves several steps for sustainability, some of which include training for administrators, teachers and support staff, and students and families. In examination of the RULER approach, researchers suggest that SEL programs must be integrated with academic instruction, implemented systematically, and include high quality and ongoing training for teachers in order to achieve positive youth outcomes (Jones, Bailey, et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2012).

**WINGS.** Inspired by Emily Dickinson's poem, "Hope is the Thing With Feathers" (Higginson & Todd, 1891), WINGS founders named this program to match their vision of helping children soar beyond their circumstances. Like the RULER approach, WINGS is an ASP based on the five key SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017). Through this no-cost program delivered primarily in schools receiving Title I funds to address the needs of students from low-income families, students learn tools and strategies to manage impulses, identify

thoughts and feelings, and make responsible decisions. Intentionally integrated throughout 15 after-school hours, sequential lessons allow students the opportunity to spend time on academics, choice or preferred and playground activities, community service, and other special projects (Deerin, 2005). Based on its multi-year programming, focus on academic and SEL skills, adherence to the four SAFE characteristics, and emphasis on the five SEL competencies, the WINGS program effectively builds executive functioning, self-regulation, self-awareness, and academic performance. In addition, studies show the program's success at lowering incidences of bullying, hyperactivity, and other problem behaviors in participating students (Wings for Kids, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Highlighting the positive impact of SEL programs on social and emotional development as well as academics, researchers describe SEL through the lens of several theoretical frameworks (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). These include social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and Goleman's (2001) theory of emotional intelligence. Social learning theory posits that individuals learn new behaviors by observing others, and through direct experiences reinforced by rewards and consequences (Bandura, 1977). Bioecological systems theory, an expansion of the earlier ecological systems theory, looks at the influence of real-life settings or social context on biopsychological aspects of human development. Finally, emotional intelligence theory focuses on one's capacity to be aware of and regulate emotions, and recognize the emotions of others (Goleman, 2001).

While each of these theories provides a framework with the potential for applicability in examination of children's development of SEL skills, as well as in planning for establishment of policies and programs for children and families, I applied SDT's BPNT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as



the theoretical framework for this action research study. With an emphasis on human well-being through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, these theories closely align to SEL goals. Additionally, focus on human motivation through the development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness provides an opportunity for action research not only as a methodology but as a tool for fulfillment of these psychological needs.

## **SDT**

“The fullest representations of humanity show people to be curious, vital and self-motivated. At their best, they are agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Yet across age groups, cultures, and socioeconomic conditions, some individuals act in proactive and positive ways while others do not. Rather than attributing these differences to biology, researchers suggest that social environment and psychology play a large role (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Through examination of biological, social, and cultural conditions, SDT provides for identification of factors that not only facilitate human motivation, social integration, and well-being but also those factors that lead to depletion, fragmentation, antisocial behaviors, and unhappiness. SDT includes both practical and critical approaches.

The practical approach looks at how contextual features impact facilitation or degradation of the development of self-regulation and wellness. This approach posits that SDT can be applied systematically in various social contexts including families and classrooms. The critical approach works alongside the practical approach by comparing and examining these social contexts and their ability to support an individual’s capacity to thrive. Like Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory, the critical approach applies to various social contexts from

proximal parent-child and classroom relationships to larger political and cultural settings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

**BPNT.** In application of both practical and critical approaches, and in order to further understand the role of social contexts and their relationship to psychology and human development, SDT comprises six sub-theories. Of these six, and most aligned with the development of SEL competencies, BPNT calls attention to the impact of basic needs on psychological health and well-being. BPNT asserts that satisfaction of an individual's basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness facilitate intrinsic motivation, internalization, and social integration. Building upon Goleman's (2001) theory of emotional intelligence, BPNT further claims that needs support and needs obstruction either contribute to or impede healthy functioning, and that evidence of this dynamic extends across various developmental and cultural contexts. SDT posits that in order for humans to experience growth, integrity, and well-being, both physical and psychological needs must be met.

***Autonomy, competence, and relatedness.*** In addition to physiological requirements for food, water, shelter, and safety, essential psychological needs include autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Defined as the need to regulate one's own actions and experiences, autonomy involves a sense of volitariness, through which one's behaviors align with his or her interests and values. Autonomy includes choice, control over one's actions, and a sense of congruency between one's actions, values, and beliefs (Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Furthermore, in reference to an individual's desire to feel socially connected to others, relatedness includes feelings of belonging and significance. Those who experience relatedness feel cared for by others and valued as contributing members of a group (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Finally, competence refers to an individual's belief in his or her own abilities. It involves one's sense of mastery and effectiveness.

***Wellness and human functioning.*** According to SDT theorists, when individuals experience greater basic psychological needs satisfaction, they enjoy enhanced health functioning and wellness. Whereas supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitate high-quality functioning, resilience, and psychological health, needs thwarting experiences obstruct the development of these satisfactions and compromise an individual's wellness. As individuals experience controlling and demanding contexts, needs thwarting prevents the development of autonomy. Similarly, challenging, discouraging, and inconsistent experiences prevent the development of competence. Finally, the experience of rejection or impersonal relationships hinder development of relatedness: all resulting in an individual's failure to thrive (Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). ACEs can contribute to needs thwarting, preventing the development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

### **Alignment to SEL**

In direct contrast to studies of ACEs which approach data from a deficit-based perspective, SDT and SEL are both asset-based (Leitch, 2017). According to SDT, development of autonomy, relatedness, and competence results in well-being. Educators support this development in students through instruction and practice in the five SEL competencies. It is through such instruction, practice, and basic psychological needs satisfaction in warm and caring environments that students may experience higher levels of motivation and greater competence, self-esteem, self-regulation, academic performance, and overall well-being (Leitch, 2017).

### **Addressing SEL Utilizing Action Research**

“Action research, as part of a life of enquiry, generates the kinds of knowledge that contribute to sustainable personal, social, and planetary well-being” (McNiff, 2017, p. 17). This practical form of inquiry involves collaborative and reflective questioning and actions with the intent to effectively solve real-world problems, improve thinking, and change practice ultimately leading to social change (McNiff, 2017; Stringer, 2014). Action research values the input of many stakeholders, empowering them through consideration of the numerous factors that impact individuals and groups: socially, culturally, relationally, and emotionally (Stringer, 2014). Understanding of the foundational elements of action research requires further examination of its historical roots.

The work of John Dewey provides a foundation for the development of action research. Dewey’s (1925) philosophy, often referred to as “empirical naturalism,” “natural empiricism,” and even “naturalistic humanism” (p. 1), looks at the relation between nature and experience. According to Dewey (1925), when nature and experience fuse in the process of change, “experience presents itself as the method, and the only method, for getting at nature, penetrating its secrets, and...deepens, enriches, and directs the further development of experience” (p. 2). Events and experiences must be studied, especially when these experiences relate to human beings. Such study allows for reflective inquiry, deeper understandings, and provides a means of control. Through this process, researchers generate and address new problems using similar methods of inquiry; this provides the opportunity for further investigation resulting in new and enhanced understandings (Dewey, 1925).

Aligned with Dewey’s (1925) philosophy, psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) also focused on experience and its potential impact on social practice. Lewin’s early contributions to the

action research field began through his study of early 1900s factory productivity. Amongst the populations with whom he worked, Lewin observed goodwill and readiness to solve and take action to address problems; thus, he proposed that such cooperative efforts could be directed towards organized action and positive intergroup relations and outcomes (Lewin, 1946).

Conducting quasi-experimental studies of factory productivity differences based on employment of democratic participation versus autocratic coercion, Lewin found that democratic participation allowed factory workers to discuss challenges, actively participate in decision-making to address them, review progress, and establish new strategies to continue building effectiveness (Adelman, 1993). Lewin's work, combined with that of Dewey, contributed to the integration of science and practice through which study and change of natural situations results in greater understanding and productivity (Adelman, 1993).

Building upon the contributions of Dewey (1925) and Lewin (1946), Kemmis (1980) further explored educational institutions as natural settings for action research. Arguing the case for the use of science to study educational practices, Kemmis (1980) saw the advantages of action research when conducted by practitioners rather than what he referred to as "academic researchers" (p. 13). In application of action research in the school setting, practitioners utilize humans for data-gathering purposes to allow for deeper understanding. Thus, action research is a form of naturalistic inquiry that values qualitative methods and an emergent design in which the research unfolds through inductive data analyses, negotiated outcomes, and "mutual shaping" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41).

While proponents of action research note the value of such participatory democratic and collaborative processes in creating social change, early critics questioned its lack of statistical rigor, scientific technique, validity, and reliability (Corey, 1952; Hodgkinson, 1957). Initially

doubting the level of confidence action researchers could place in results, as well as their generalizability to other settings, Corey (1952) noted potential problems with population sampling. He posed that for greater confidence in results, population samplings must be random. To that end, he statistically analyzed frequency of distributions of IQs for students in classes in which the teacher either conducted action research or did not. Corey eventually found that for all chi square tests, statistical analyses demonstrated random student samplings across both groups (Corey, 1952). These findings suggest that population samplings may be considered random, and that action research results can be generalized and extended vertically to future sampling populations (Corey, 1952).

Less concerned with population sampling, Hodgkinson (1957) challenged the action research methods of those he perceived to be “amateur researchers” (p. 142). He noted their singular focus on finding practical solutions to problems. After finding solutions, these researchers considered themselves to be at “the end of the road” (Hodgkinson, 1957, p. 146). If these solutions truly marked the end of the road, Hodgkinson doubted the possibility that action research could result in comprehensive school improvement.

It is likely, however, that Hodgkinson (1957) considered a different notion of action research, one in which action simply meant doing. Doing, according to Hodgkinson, was not enough; rather, he saw opportunities for invention, encouragement of ideas, development of flexibility and trust, and experimentation that could potentially lead to changed practice. With a similarly positive focus, he also saw the role of action research in re-educating the teacher, and the potential for changed values and attitudes through the process of working on a common problem. Considering these positive features, Hodgkinson might support the present notion of

action research that goes beyond simple doing to include the continuous and iterative action research cycle.

This continuous and iterative action research design not only aligns to the features of SDT but to the goals of the OST SEL program examined in this study. In contrast to the traditional process of schooling in which adults often make decisions that impact students without considering the experiences of these students, the action research design provided the OST SEL program participants in this study the opportunity to be involved in learning about and making programmatic changes designed to impact them (Galletta & Jones, 2010). Rather than simply being subjects of study, action research participants partnered to develop questions regarding problems they experienced in the community, studied those questions, and created ways to act on results (Smith, Davis, & Bhowmik, 2010). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), such value-bound, naturalistic inquiry produces meaningful results with the existence of congruence between the problem, subject of evaluation, theory, and research context. In other words, as program participants built relationships, learned social roles, produced knowledge, and interacted to make programmatic changes within their own setting, they not only realized they were valued and contributing members of the process, but may have experienced greater results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nind, 2011; Strack et al., 2004).

### **Tools for Quality After-School Programming**

In order to both provide standards for quality after-school programming, and to evaluate program effectiveness, the CDE, NCSL, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Afterschool Alliance, The Aspen Institute, and CASEL, each suggest and furnish specific tools for program designers, practitioners, and evaluators. While each set of tools is unique to the organization that

developed it, community partners seeking to design effective programs should consider all relevant information.

The CDE's *Quality Standards for Expanded Learning in California* (2014) provide a vision for after-school, summer, and intersession programs focusing on academics as well as SEL. The six point-of-service quality standards include the provision of a safe and supportive environment that promotes active and engaged learning, skill-building, youth voice and leadership, the opportunity for healthy choices and behaviors, and diversity, access, and equity (CDE, 2014). The complementary programmatic quality standards provide for quality staff that possess a clear vision, mission, and purpose, consist of collaborative partnerships, and focus on continuous quality improvement with strong program management (CDE, 2014). Each of these standards includes further definition by specific features at the program, staff, and participant levels.

While the CDE's standards emphasize factors related to implementation of OST programming, the NCSL, Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Afterschool Alliance, and CASEL more heavily focus on quality SEL programming and practices. The NCSL, for example, calls for greater alignment between school-based and OST programs, implementation by highly trained and qualified staff, and intentional and explicit SEL skills instruction (NCSL, 2018). The Afterschool Alliance also advocates for alignment and quality staffing, adding recommendations for provision of engaging project-based experiential learning, and development and advancement of youth voice to build confidence, empathy, and openness to diversity (Afterschool Alliance, 2018). The Harvard Graduate School of Education's EASEL Lab recommends safe and positive program environments that develop high quality relationships, are developmentally appropriate and engaging, and provide skill-building



opportunities (Jones, Brush et al., 2017). Finally, CASEL (2013) identified evidence-based training that includes integration of SAFE skill-development activities (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

### **Measures of Program Effectiveness**

Assessments of SEL programs include the measurement of positive youth outcomes in participating students. Developed in collaboration with K-12, SEL, and assessment researchers and practitioners, the *SEL Assessment Guide* assists schools, districts, and other SEL providers in measurement of program effectiveness (CASEL, 2020a). Included in the guide are recommendations for preparing to assess, selecting appropriate measurement tools, and utilizing formative and summative data. Assessments align with CASEL's (2017) SEL competencies, include categorization by developmental level, and take various forms including observations and rating scales as well as student self-report survey questionnaires. In addition, CASEL (2020a) identified specific metrics including self-assessments and planning rubrics, and parent, teacher, and student evaluations. Specifically designed to meet the needs of the evaluating organization, these tools provide valuable feedback for measuring program impact, reporting to stakeholders, and informing program design and implementation to maximize effectiveness (Devaney et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2018).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I provided a review of ACE-related literature and the potential impact of SEL programs designed to address positive youth development. This included a definition of ACEs, and details about their impact on academics, behavior, and long-term mental health outcomes. Additionally, I defined SEL and highlighted evidence-based programmatic features, especially as they relate to after-school and OST programs. A review of several theoretical

frameworks provided a foundation for validation of the selection of BPNT as the lens through which to explore SEL programs and their effects. Finally, in this review I provided the history, critiques and strengths of the action research methodology that guided this study, as well as a brief review of suggested tools for program improvement. In the following chapter I describe the informal action research iterations conducted in 2018 and 2019 and lay the foundation for the formal study presented here.

## CHAPTER 3: FOUNDATIONS FOR THE ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

### **Introduction**

In order to better understand the relevance and import of the formal action research study, it is necessary to understand its foundation. In 2016, my teenage son and I, after recognizing our own ACEs and an essential need to support others like us in the community, established a nonprofit organization in order to disrupt the status quo of mental health and wellness instruction and resources for children and families. While we recognized the fact that local school districts employ psychologists, behaviorists, social workers, and mental health therapists, we also realized that not all students and families are aware of or qualify for these services. Additionally, due to the fact that many states, including California, do not yet have SEL standards, these essential skills are not intentionally and explicitly taught in all schools.

With the literature pointing to the need to support students impacted by ACEs and other traumas, and the increasing number of students exhibiting both externalizing and internalizing behaviors, we established a wellness-focused nonprofit and designed programs to teach social-emotional competencies to elementary school students in OST settings. The purpose of this action research study was to determine actions and interventions that would lead to greater program effectiveness for students and families in the community.

### **Previous Iterations**

Building upon data collected and modifications made during the first two years of informal action research, the formal cycle presented here continued to focus on the nonprofit organization's pilot OST SEL program. Table 1 summarizes pre-dissertation action research cycles in years 2018 and 2019.

Table 1

*Action Research Pre-Dissertation Pilot Cycles in Years 2018 and 2019*

Plan/Inquiry Iterations	Act	Observe	Reflect
What can we, as a nonprofit organization, do to support families with mental health and wellness?	Find current mental health and wellness programs in the community.	The nonprofit organization team evaluates program accessibility related to location and cost.	In the local elementary school attendance area, there are no free community-based mental health programs for non-qualifying students.
What can we do to provide SEL instruction in elementary schools?	Develop an OST learning program and pilot at the local elementary site.	Facilitators write evaluations and students complete journal summaries at the end of each session.	Informal measures of the current pilot yield initial effectiveness data.
How can we more quantifiably examine program effectiveness?	Implement student and parent/guardian surveys.	The nonprofit organization's educational design team analyzes survey data looking for trends.	Descriptive statistical analysis of pre-, mid- and post-survey measures suggest increases in students' perceived application of SEL competencies but fail to yield similar parent/guardian data.
How do we involve parents?	Implement parent/community workshops.	Parent/community workshop attendees provide written feedback.	<p>Parent attendees provide positive feedback on written evaluations, but attendance is low.</p> <p>Simultaneously, student attendance at the OST SEL program is intermittent based on the multi-track year-round calendar.</p>

(Table 1 continued)

Plan/Inquiry Iterations	Act	Observe	Reflect
How do we address student attendance issues and the year-round schedule?	Revise the program from 12 sessions implemented over three months to eight sessions implemented over the course of one month.	Facilitators write evaluations and students complete journal summaries at the end of each session.	Informal measures of the current pilot yield initial effectiveness data. Participants inquire about a retreat-style program to be implemented over the course of several Friday afternoon/evenings.
How do we involve teachers and support staff?	Establish a focus group to work with staff, students, and parent/guardians to inquire about relationships, SEL, and school culture.	Utilize pre- and post-survey data regarding shared norms and expectations for student and staff behavior and SEL to build a positive school climate.	Findings suggest that teachers/staff require additional training and practice in schoolwide PBIS expectations, SEL, and restorative practice interventions.
What are the characteristics of an effective SEL program and how can we develop a retreat-style program that includes these characteristics?	Expand the focus group to examine the current program for strengths and challenges.	Effective SEL programs include SAFE characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sequenced</li> <li>- active</li> <li>- focused</li> <li>- explicitly defined and targeted (CASEL, 2013)</li> </ul>	The nonprofit educational design team evaluates the current program for SAFE characteristics and considers modifications for implementation of a retreat-style program in 2019-2020.
In what ways does the retreat-style format appeal to participating students and families?	Interview participating students and families regarding appeal of the new schedule.	Utilize Google survey feedback and fact-finding from OST SEL program personnel and school district facilities for scheduling decisions.	Stakeholders show interest in a Friday program format for the following reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- fewer conflicts with other on-site after-school activities</li> <li>- no conflict with homework schedule</li> <li>- larger time-block for learning and practice</li> <li>- OST SEL personnel availability</li> </ul> Free facilities use.

As both co-founder and Director of Education for the nonprofit and its programs, I worked with the organization's educational design team over the course of 2018 and 2019 to design, implement, and refine the curriculum, instruction, schedule, and other features of the OST SEL pilot program for greater effectiveness. Based on this ongoing inquiry, the following narrative includes details of the various iterations.

**First iteration.** In focusing on disrupting the status quo of mental health and wellness in our community, the organization's initial actions were to engage in fact-finding. We needed not only to learn more about student and family needs, but also what mental health resources were available in the local community. This investigation included conversations with school district student support service providers, medical partners, local mental health organizations, and community-based nonprofits. We found that, in the local school attendance area, no free mental health programs existed for elementary students not identified through individual education plans, foster youth services, or other qualifying events.

**Second iteration.** In response to the nonprofit organization's question about what could be done to provide SEL instruction in elementary schools, we developed the first iteration of the OST SEL program in the summer of 2018. Convening a team of teachers, students, and mental health professionals we gathered research on existing programs, SEL standards, and practices that support SEL. We wrote a 12-module SEL program and ran an initial pilot at a local elementary school. Throughout the pilot, program facilitators wrote evaluations of each module, and student-participants completed journal summaries about their experiences. These informal measures provided valuable feedback, allowing the team to modify and refine the curriculum for continuous improvement.

**Third iteration.** Continuing the action research process in the fall of that same year, the nonprofit organization's board questioned how to more quantifiably examine program effectiveness. Implementing student and parent/guardian surveys, the team examined several variables including participant perception, understanding, and application of the five SEL competencies as well as overall program satisfaction. Again, the evaluation goal was to look for data trends that would guide program modifications and improvements. Based on simple descriptive statistical analysis, we noted that student perceptions of their own understanding and application of SEL competencies increased during program participation. However, we noted no changes in parent perceptions of student improvement.

**Fourth iteration.** The nonprofit organization's board used these findings to examine the role of parent/guardian involvement during the winter of 2019. Perhaps parent/guardians themselves did not possess the understanding necessary to determine changes in student social-emotional skills. Acting on this question, the team implemented parent/community workshops designed to bring adults together to learn about the program, the skills taught and practiced, how to support SEL skill development, and additional parenting tools and strategies. In observation and reflection of these 1-hour evening sessions, workshop attendees provided written feedback to course facilitators. We used this feedback not only to assess effectiveness, but to guide future workshop refinement and modification. While attendees reported positive feedback, attendance was low: leading to additional questions for the team and organizational partners to examine.

**Fifth iteration.** Observing parent/community attendance as an issue, the team also examined student attendance during the spring of 2019. Due to the fact that the pilot site operated on a multi-track year-round schedule, in any given month an entire portion of the student population was off-track and not attending school. As a result, participation in all 12

OST SEL program modules became a challenge for off-track students; with parent/guardians at work it was difficult for some students to obtain transportation, and others went on vacation out of the area. Poor attendance could lead to curricular gaps impacting the potential for program effectiveness.

In response to this challenge, the team worked to modify the 12-module program implemented over the course of 12 weeks to become an eight-module program implemented twice weekly over the course of four weeks. Based on this new model, during any given month students from three of the four tracks were at school and able to attend all program dates. Based on informal survey feedback, participants and parent/guardians found the shorter program more accessible in relation to the multi-track year-round calendar. Some questioned the option of a retreat-style series of SEL programming over a course of several weekends to provide greater ease of access not only for children but for parent/guardian participation as well.

**Sixth iteration.** While the team began to address attendance issues, we also suggested a need for greater teacher and staff support of the OST SEL program and for the students and families involved. In response to the question of how to involve teachers and support staff, the team established a focus group in the spring of 2019 to work more closely with teachers, administrators and staff, students, and parent/guardians to study relationships and their connection to school rules, expectations, and SEL. The focus group determined that a lack of clear schoolwide expectations impeded the development of positive relationships and SEL at the site.

As a result, the team developed several strategies to work with the larger school community in order to clarify behavioral and SEL expectations. In measurement of these actions, I worked with the team to utilize survey data including variables such as shared



understandings and expectations for student and staff behavior, as well as beliefs and practices regarding student behavior reinforcement strategies and adult-student relationships. In July 2019, we collaboratively designed new student and staff expectations and implemented these at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year.

**Seventh iteration.** Building upon the work of the focus group and its emphasis on schoolwide expectations and taking into account participant feedback regarding development of retreat-style programming, the nonprofit organization sought additional input in designing and implementing other OST SEL programs. During the summer of 2019 the focus group expanded to include additional students, parent/guardians, and community members from outside the educational setting. These individuals provided different perspectives in both examining the current program for strengths and challenges and designing new offerings to address scheduling requests from participating children and families.

These requests indicated a desire for OST SEL programming to occur on either Friday afternoons, or Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings. For either option, requests called for a minimum of two retreat-style sessions between which student participants would have the opportunity to practice and apply key learnings. Requests also focused on the idea that weekend participation would not deter from homework or other after-school commitments, that parent/guardians would have greater accessibility, and that school staff might be able to co-facilitate learning and be part of the SEL efforts.

Upon further investigation of the petition for retreat-style programming for participating students and families, we sought additional input regarding preferred days and times, as well as organizational logistics related to personnel, venue, and potential cost. Informal Google surveys provided information that students and families preferred to attend sessions on Friday afternoons

rather than a Friday/Saturday retreat as weekend activities might negatively impact participation. School staff also agreed that they were more likely to engage in the program if scheduled on Fridays. Data related to organizational logistics demonstrated a preference for Fridays as the school facilities could be used free of charge, and that OST SEL personnel were more available to facilitate Friday afternoon sessions versus other days and times.

**Eighth iteration.** Based on this input, the nonprofit organization's educational design team and I designed and implemented the new OST SEL Fridays program. Taking the eight-day curriculum implemented during the previous informal action research cycle, we condensed it to four 2-hour sessions focused on CASEL's SAFE program features—safe, focused, active, and explicit—and the five SEL competencies (CASEL, 2013, 2017). To address sequence, the revised curriculum introduced the concept of self-awareness, proceeded to a focus on self-management, then social awareness and relationship skills, and finally responsible decision-making. Addressing activity, the curriculum included hands-on, physical, and experiential learning. Finally, to provide focus and explicitness, each curricular module maintained emphasis on the specific SEL competency addressed, included definitions of that competency, and consisted of direct instruction for immediate application. This informal iteration of the program and its curriculum became the focus of the formal action research study presented here.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I provided foundational information about previous informal action research cycles and their contribution to the present study. Beginning with a focus on disrupting the status quo of mental health and wellness for children and families in the community, I provided a brief description of the establishment of the nonprofit organization as well as the various iterations and refinements to the OST SEL programs piloted during 2018 and 2019.

Based on pilot feedback from participating students, families, and school personnel, each subsequent iteration resulted in modifications for greater program effectiveness. The following chapter includes a description of the formal action research methodology, participants and data collection methods, theoretical framework, and considerations of ethics, bias, and trustworthiness.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

In challenging the status quo of wellness instruction and practice in an elementary school, the purpose of this action research study was to examine an OST program designed to teach SEL competencies and to determine actions and interventions leading to greater program effectiveness. Developed and implemented by a northern California-based nonprofit organization, the highlighted OST SEL program strives to address academic and behavioral challenges, as well as overall mental health and wellness in third through fifth grade elementary school students. Instruction focuses on the five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017): social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. As the lead researcher, I worked with research participants and used action research to define the processes involved in designing a more effective program to meet the SEL needs of elementary school students. This chapter describes the methodology including the iterative action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, the tools and rationale, participants, as well as considerations of bias, ethics, and trustworthiness.

### **Inquiry Approach**

Action research is conducted by and with insiders to the setting, rather than to them. By working collaboratively, these insiders reflect on their experiences and practices in order to build knowledge. While engaged in problem-solving within real-life situations, action researchers demonstrate an open-mindedness in relation to the topic, key stakeholders, and the data. They are open to modifications, uncertainty, and new directions the study might take. This flexibility,

co-learning, and self-correction are all forms of social action that have the strength to disrupt the status quo and lead to greater program effectiveness (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

By utilizing an action research design, participants and I sought to examine, modify, and refine current practices for greater effectiveness of the highlighted OST SEL program implemented in partnership with a northern California elementary school. As a leader in the nonprofit, I worked closely with the organization's educational design team, board, and its partners engaging in informal action research since inception of the OST SEL program in 2018. This formal action research cycle built upon the foundational work and continued the iterative plan, act, observe, reflect process aimed at program improvement (McNiff, 2017; Stringer, 2014).

### **Methodology**

Utilizing action research, participants and I worked collaboratively within the research setting of an OST SEL program. Having been the focus of several informal action research iterations of the pilot program, a northern California elementary school served as the research site. In this section, I discuss the research setting, program under study, and considerations regarding researcher bias and positionality.

### **Context of the Inquiry**

The OST SEL program operates in partnership between a northern California-based nonprofit organization and local elementary schools. Based upon ongoing collaboration between the nonprofit organization and administrators, students, teachers, and families since inception of the OST SEL program in the fall of 2018, one particular elementary school served as the research site. The nonprofit organization's mission is to provide children and families with wellness instruction and resources. This mission closely aligns with that of the school; school-

site leaders dedicate themselves to the mission of teaching essential skills in order for students to experience academic and social success in a safe and nurturing environment that promotes responsibility and mutual respect.

This transitional kindergarten through sixth grade school is home to over 900 students from families representing a diverse population including 10% African American, 31% Hispanic, with 14% identifying as two or more races, and 32% Caucasian. The remaining 13% identify as Asian and Filipino. The staff comprises 65 teachers including special educators and resource teachers, two administrators, and district-funded support staff including a part-time school psychologist, nurse, and speech pathologist. Part-time mental health therapists and interns, as well as a part-time behaviorist serve students several days each week.

Designed to solicit information from participants and stakeholders including students, their teachers, administrators and staff, parents/guardians, and community members, I engaged in the action research process to identify program highlights and growth opportunities. In turn, I worked with action research participants to make curriculum refinements and modifications for the intended benefit of current and future participants. Findings provided guidance to the action research team as well as the nonprofit organization's board of directors, educational design team, and funding partners in making recommendations for program improvements and expansion to additional schools and districts. Findings may also serve other community partners in their development and implementation of new OST SEL programs.

## **Research Design**

As the lead researcher, my underlying belief is that SEL produces a positive effect on student and family mental health and wellness. This belief, viewed through the lens of BPNT, guided my vision of disrupting the status quo. By engaging stakeholders as participants in an

inquiry environment designed to enhance social-emotional development for improvement in the quality of their lives, I looked at development of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stringer, 2014).

Stakeholders included members of the original informal action research focus groups as well as additional students, teachers and staff, parent/guardians, administrators, and other interested district personnel and community members. As the lead researcher, I gathered potential study participants, provided them with information about the action research design and its dynamic nature, and engaged them in the informed consent process. I shared the study's timeline and asked participants for a two-month commitment.

Working with these action research participants, I continued to focus on program improvement through this formal iteration of the action research inquiry. Building upon previous cycles and resulting program modifications, we engaged in learning how to improve upon the SAFE program features identified by CASEL (2013)—effective SEL programs are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit—within the OST SEL program. Beginning with a plan to address the research question, I worked with the action research team to examine measurement tools and data collected, identify actions, and apply modifications to the winter 2020 session of the OST SEL program. The action research team and I subsequently engaged in observation, data analysis, questioning, and reflection not only to insure validity of the findings, but to move the process forward to the next iteration in the research process.

### **Potential Biases and Researcher Positionality**

As the lead researcher, facilitator, and creative investigator of the study, I acted as the catalyst to empower the group, and actively engaged others in the inquiry community (Stringer, 2014). Possessing my own values, I remained extremely cautious to monitor and reduce bias. I

worked to “become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions...refrain[ing] from judgement” both prior to conducting, and throughout the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27).

To address potential bias and researcher positionality, I collaborated with the action research team to utilize phenomenological epoché (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this process, we critically reflected on our own experiences and judgements. Validation group and research associate action research team meetings began with self-reflective journaling sessions during which time participants responded to several prompts (see Appendix A) designed to encourage thinking about their own experiences, assumptions and preconceptions about the study, participant-respondents, and the data. Upon independent journal completion, the team gathered to discuss self-reflections, particular concerns raised during the process, and ways to address them.

Self-reflection allowed for bracketing of assumptions and judgements during the data collection process. According to Tufford and Newman (2010), bracketing “mitigate[s] the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research...” (p. 81). Furthermore, emphasis on bracketing allowed participants to attain deeper levels of reflection throughout the many stages of the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Due to my insider positionality, I included reflection as an essential component of the study. As co-founder of the nonprofit organization, primary author of the OST SEL program curriculum, professional development coordinator for teachers and staff who implement the program, chief recruiter, and former teacher at the research site; I reflected upon my position as both insider in the nonprofit organization and in the school community. While my positionality might have shifted or changed during the study, I recognized my role in relation to others and the



program and constantly engaged in action and reflection as the research story evolved (Herr & Anderson, 2015; McNiff, 2017). To strengthen the research and more effectively apply findings directly back to the OST SEL program, I addressed my positionality through continuous self-reflection, and also engaged the research participants in the learning process for personal, professional, and organizational transformation.

Proceeding through the study, I realized that my positionality might actually contribute to organizational transformation in several ways. For example, I intimately understand the mission, vision, and goals of the OST SEL program. Having designed the program based on research and evidence, and also having engaged in all previous iterations of the program pilot, I fully understand the history, past successes and challenges, and the focus on continuous improvement. Furthermore, due to past work at the research site administrators, staff, students, and parents/guardians might have higher levels of confidence in, and rapport with me. It is possible that long-standing relationships and a history of working collaboratively in various aspects of the school setting contributed to deeper and more open communication during the research process. Due to familiarity with the setting, I could assess situations and note particular paths of inquiry of which an outsider might be unaware (Mercer, 2007).

This level of familiarity, however, might also present several disadvantages. For example, insider positionality could prevent my investigation of obvious questions, contribute to my reliance on memories of past experiences with participants, or on incidental data collected outside of formal focus groups. Additionally, due to a concern about possible judgement, collaborating participants might fail to disclose particular information or be completely forthright (Mercer, 2007). To combat these potential issues, I repeatedly reminded participants that their responses would guide the collective process toward program improvement for themselves and

others. I strived to maintain an essential balance between the potential for insider bias and my deeper understanding of data collection, ethics, and validity.

In further consideration of these issues, I engaged outside sources as critical friends or research associates to interact with me and the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Before engaging in this method of bracketing, research associates and I formalized an agreement regarding compensation and confidentiality; they received no compensation, nor did they have access to data with any identifying information. Together we engaged in a supportive partnership to bracket assumptions and challenge preconceptions, analyze data, identify themes, and deeply explore findings.

I also engaged in reflexive journaling, or reflexive bracketing, in order to obtain a richer data set (Gearing, 2004; McNiff, 2017; Ortlipp, 2008; Tufford & Newman, 2004). Having commenced the reflexive journaling process prior to formal action research implementation, I used this data to more effectively work with the action research team to examine decision-making, values, judgements, challenges, and experiences with both the research and data collection process. Through self-reflection in a variety of contexts—including interview protocol planning, design of informed consent documents, literature review, engagement with participants, research associates, and validation groups—I made changes to the design, clarified aims, and engaged in a reciprocal process with participants leading to more descriptive data. As part of the look, think, act routine the research team and I engaged in a spiral of activity including the critical component of reflection or reanalysis prior to making modifications and further implementation of the action plan (Stringer, 2014).

## **Methods**

I used several data collection tools to strengthen the iterative action research cycle. These tools included student and staff surveys and adult and student focus groups. In addition, I maintained an audit trail of notes from research associate and validation group meetings, emails and notes on interventions, notes and transcripts from focus group meetings, and my own reflexive journal notes. This combined data provided valuable information to guide the inquiry process throughout the action research study.

### **Participants and Stakeholders**

Participants included elementary school students, teachers, site and district-level administrators and staff, parent/guardians, and community members interested in or formally enrolled in the OST SEL program both prior to and during the winter of 2020. After obtaining IRB, district, and site-level administrative approval I invited participants to engage in the action research process. Recruitment procedures took various forms in order to address the diverse group of participants and stakeholders.

Flyer recruitment included distribution to elementary school students, staff, parent/guardians, school district personnel, and community members. Using the nonprofit organization's database, I emailed recruitment flyers (see Appendix B) and letters (see Appendix C) to parent/guardians of previous OST SEL program participants. In addition, the site administrator used the school's email distribution list and I also sent flyers to other parents, families, and community members through my personal email directory. In-person verbal recruitment included utilization of prepared scripts for students (see Appendix D) and adults (see Appendix E). Through the recruitment process, I invited participants to attend an initial

informational meeting, solicited their participation in the action research study, and engaged them in the informed consent process.

**Students.** Two fifth grade students who formerly attended the OST SEL program, and eight students in grades three through five enrolled in the winter 2020 session, participated in the action research study. These participants voluntarily attended an informational meeting with parent/guardians during which they learned about the OST SEL program and the action research study. For students who attended the program in the past, parent/guardians signed minor consent forms (see Appendix F). For students new to the OST SEL program, parent/guardians completed program registration forms and signed minor consent forms for their children to participate in the research study. Student research participants signed child assent documents (see Appendix G) in the week preceding the first focus group and two weeks prior to program commencement. Each of these student research participants indicated interest in the action research change-making process and maintained a unique position for sharing their direct experiences regarding the program under study.

Aligned with SDT and the role of motivation in encouraging or discouraging engagement in positive behaviors, research suggests that students engaged in action research often extend their learning and experience into their classroom life (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van Sluys, 2010). In addition, when provided the opportunity to engage and be instrumental in the research study, they build social-emotional competencies such as relationships, social roles, and social morality. This is especially beneficial to youth involved in action research as they realize their own value and contributions to the process (Strack et al., 2004).

**Parent/guardians.** Also seen as contributing members to the action research process, I invited parent/guardians of former program participants and those enrolled in the winter 2020

OST SEL session. These participants attended an informational meeting about the OST SEL program and the research study. Two parent/guardians of former participants completed informed consent documents (see Appendix H) indicating their interest. Eight additional parent/guardians of new program participants completed registration paperwork necessary for their children's participation in the OST SEL program as well as informed consent forms for their own participation in the action research study. They each identified a family or student need to develop social-emotional competencies and a desire to engage in program improvement.

**Teachers.** Essential to the study were former and current teachers of students and families enrolled in the OST SEL program. These teachers either worked with students enrolled in a 2019 program, or taught students enrolled in the winter 2020 session. Of the 15 who attended an informational session regarding the research, 13 committed to the research process by providing informed consent (see Appendix I). Because these teachers work extensively to support student academic and social-emotional growth daily, I considered their participation highly valuable—not only in their contributions to transformational programmatic changes within the OST SEL program and participating students, but potentially within the larger school community.

**Administrators and staff.** I also invited school and district administrators, school-site mental health therapists and behaviorists, and other interested staff to participate in the study. These individuals attended informational meetings regarding the OST SEL program, the action research design and proposed timeline, and two participated in the informed consent process. Committed to providing students with the academic and social-emotional tools to thrive beyond high school, these additional team members offered different perspectives, knowledge, and expertise to inform the research process.

**Critical friends/research associates.** Three critical friends—referred to as research associates for purposes of this study—participated in the action research process. These associates met at regular intervals and followed meeting protocols (see Appendix J) by soliciting and providing feedback to promote reflective learning. The research associates included one close friend; as a veteran elementary school teacher, this critical friend worked as a thoughtful practitioner and critic of educational resources dedicated to serving children. In addition, an educational consultant with a recent doctoral degree provided a scholar’s perspective. This individual possessed historical knowledge of the OST SEL program as well as scholarly knowledge of the action research methodology. Finally, a practicing psychologist from outside of the educational context engaged in the study. Because SEL is a key component of mental health, this research associate examined the process from the perspective of the mental health professional: critically reviewing, questioning, and assisting in the iterative action research cycle.

**Validation group.** Finally, serving a different purpose, the validation group was comprised of research associates and two additional research participants who represented the nonprofit organization’s educational design team. The validation group raised questions and provided critical reflection throughout the research process, asking for evidence as well as formative and summative evaluation (McNiff, 2017). The validation group met at regular intervals throughout the action research process with each meeting protocol (see Appendix K) including a presentation and review of the study’s claims and questions, a progress report, emerging themes and data trends, general findings and provisional conclusions, and a discussion of ethical considerations and validity (McNiff, 2017). In working with the validation group, I sought critical feedback to inform the study.

## **Data Collection/Instrumentation/Procedures**

The research design utilized data collected from participant surveys and focus groups. Action research participants included former OST SEL program attendees, those enrolled in the program in the winter of 2020, their parent/guardians, teachers, administrators and staff, and outside community members. Through data analysis, I worked with the action research team to engage in the action research process to design actions and measures for future iterations that would potentially lead to greater effectiveness of the OST SEL program.

**Surveys.** Implemented as part of the program's curriculum, students participating in the OST SEL program completed pre-program surveys during the first session of the OST SEL, and end-of-program surveys during the last session. Teachers of participating students also completed pre-program surveys no earlier than two weeks prior to the first session, and end-of-program surveys during the week following the last session. Surveys featured demographic data, such as self-identified ethnicity, gender, and participant age, as well as prompts related to the overarching variables of student understanding and application of social-emotional competencies. Student surveys included self-ratings and opinions while staff surveys required teacher observation in rating student application of SEL competencies in the school setting.

Student Survey 1 (see Appendices L and M) included 16 prompts soliciting student perceptions of the frequency at which they apply SEL competencies in their daily lives. Eight of the 16 prompts included positively worded sentences aligned to the SEL competencies while the other eight included negatively worded sentences. For example, prompt 2 read "I can calm myself when I'm angry or upset," while prompt 10 stated, "It's hard to control myself when I'm upset or angry." This design allowed for prompt calibration with the intent of greater validity.

Student Survey 1 also included an active component. Rather than distributing paper-and-pencil surveys, I provided each participant an envelope with a preassigned student identification number. Each envelope included survey prompts cut into small strips, one prompt per strip, listing the preassigned student identification number. They also included written instructions directing students to read one strip at a time and sort the strips into labeled baskets placed throughout the program space. Basket labels corresponded to Likert ratings 1 through 3. Students placed prompts in Basket 1 to indicate “always true,” Basket 2 to indicate “sometimes true,” and Basket 3 to indicate “rarely true.” After participants sorted the prompts, I collected the strips and compiled the data into a spreadsheet according to prompt and student identification number. I used this same process to conduct both pre-program and end-of-program student surveys.

Student Survey 2 (see Appendices N and O) included eight prompts soliciting student opinion of the importance of each SEL competency. Utilizing this survey, I intended to determine whether student participants considered the competencies relevant in their lives. If they did not deem the competencies important, it might be possible that they would possess no desire to learn and improve. I conducted Student Survey 2 as a paper-and-pencil measurement immediately following completion of Student Survey 1. Using the same preassigned student identification numbers, I distributed the surveys, read each prompt aloud, and participants rated their opinions using a 3-point Likert scale. For this survey, 1 indicated “very important,” 2 indicated “somewhat important, and 3 indicated “not important.” I collected all surveys and compiled data according to prompt and student identification number. I used this same process for both pre-program and end-of-program data collection.



Teachers of program participants also completed pre-program and end-of-program paper-and-pencil surveys (see Appendices P and Q). These surveys included 16 positively and negatively worded prompts—again for calibration—that mimicked Student Survey 1 prompts. Prompts aligned to the SEL competencies and required teachers to use a 3-point Likert scale to rate student frequency of applying SEL competencies in their daily lives. A score of 1 indicated “always true,” 2 indicated “sometimes true,” and 3 indicated “rarely true.” So that teachers had context for their responses, surveys included student names. Upon completion and collection of these surveys, however, I replaced student names with the unique student identification numbers preassigned to each. I then entered data by prompt and student identification number, following the same protocol for both pre-program and end-of-program data collection.

**Focus groups.** In addition to student and staff survey measures, the action research design included focus group data. Informal action research focus groups convened during the program’s pilot years in 2018-2019. After attaining IRB approval, I invited pilot focus group members to collaborate with additional students, parent/guardians, teachers, administrators and staff, and community members to form the formal action research team. I obtained informed consent, minor consent, and child assent and utilized IRB-approved group protocols for each adult and student focus group conducted at the research site. I also worked with the validation group and research associates to craft supplemental prompts as we proceeded through the data analysis process. Focus group protocols can be found in Appendices R and S. Upon completion of each focus group, I uploaded audio files to an online transcription website, reviewed and edited each automated transcript, and brought these back to participants for authentication.

**Reflexive journal.** To further triangulate the focus group and survey data, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study. This allowed not only for bracketing of assumptions, but

a place to record my thoughts, ideas, and experiences. According to Cunliffe (2016), reflexivity works on two levels; researchers can be self-reflexive and critically reflexive. While self-reflexivity allows researchers to elevate their own consciousness by examining their beliefs, values, and assumptions, critical reflexivity provides the opportunity to look at features outside of themselves—including organizational practices and social structures (Cunliffe, 2016; Malacrida, 2007; Ortlipp, 2008). By making note of my assumptions, knowledge claims, relationships with research participants, and decisions made throughout the research process, I made my thinking visible (Ortlipp, 2008). This visibility contributed not only to the collaborative efforts of the validation group and research associates in the questions we asked and program modifications we made, but to our research decisions and ultimate data reporting.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the process of data collection and analysis should occur simultaneously. Thus, the timeline for data analysis commenced from my first reflexive journal entry, continued to the first combined OST SEL/action research informational meetings, and throughout the iterative action research process. Survey responses provided quantitative data as a supplement to the primarily qualitative methods of focus group inquiry.

I compiled pre-program survey data into spreadsheets and began informal analysis to note SEL competencies that students and teachers identified as highlights and growth opportunities. This information provided guidance for the OST SEL program facilitators, the action research team, and the nonprofit's educational design team as we worked with student participants, revised curriculum, and developed supplemental focus group questions. Upon collection of end-of-program surveys, I also entered data into spreadsheets and used descriptive statistics to compare against pre-program survey data. Looking at mean responses and percentage change, I

noted trends relating to SEL knowledge, skill application, and identification of SAFE program features.

Action research cycles also included analysis of focus group data. While I designed initial protocols for IRB approval prior to involving action research participants, I worked collaboratively with the action research team to design and revise subsequent focus group prompts to build upon the existing guiding questions. Pre-program focus group meetings took place in January 2020, prior to the February 2020 action research cycle. End-of-program focus groups took place following conclusion of the program in March 2020. Having received consent from both adult and student focus group participants, I transcribed and authenticated audio recordings captured during each meeting.

Taking these authenticated transcripts, I began inductive category construction through the coding process beginning with open coding and progressing to informal axial, and finally moving to selective coding, to identify emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Keeping the inquiry focus on program improvement and the theoretical framework of BPNT at the forefront of this data review, I read and reread each transcript to identify distinct units of meaning that could be separated from other information provided. This open and expansive review allowed me to grasp core ideas, assign initial codes, and make marginal notes in each transcript for further analysis and review (Creswell, 2012).

Moving from open coding to an informal, simplified version of axial coding I began sorting the unitized data into tentative categories based on recurring regularities and patterns. While I did not follow formal axial coding protocol—looking for interrelationships between conditions, actions-interactions, and consequences or outcomes (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019)—this

process involved consideration of each category, comparison of emerging themes with my data set, and a search for potential linkages. I extensively reviewed focus group transcripts; lifting specific words and phrases relating to the categories and checking for frequency and extensiveness of comments and ideas, overlap between categories, and exhaustion of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As relationships between and across categories began to solidify, I engaged in a form of selective coding to name identified themes. By naming the themes congruent to the inquiry focus on program improvement, CASEL's five SEL competencies and SAFE program features, and the CDE's Guiding Principles, I identified concepts that not only explained the data, but guided the action research process forward (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moghaddam, 2006). From there, I compared themes both within and across the adult and student focus group data. For example, I compared pre-program and end-of-program student focus group data, pre-program and end-of-program adult focus group data, and then merged the two for further inductive analysis. As the inductive construction of categories and themes progressed, I worked with the research associates to design and redesign action plans for the next cycle of the action research study.

Based on the established timelines and calendar for the action research study, the action research team met throughout the process, continuing to examine both survey and focus group data. In addition, the team engaged in critical dialogues, delving deeply into examination of programmatic features, participant experiences, and other factors related to the OST SEL program (Stringer, 2014). These dialogues guided the research cycle and influenced decision-making about proposed actions, reflections upon those actions after implementation, and potential next steps.

### **Trustworthiness/Quality/Validity**

In order to demonstrate methodological rigor including dependability and confirmability, the action research study incorporated triangulation, data authentication and authorization, participant debriefing, diverse case analysis, and audit trails (McNiff, 2017; Stringer, 2014). By engaging focus groups composed of the OST SEL program student participants, teachers, staff, administrators, parent/guardians, and research associates I triangulated the data for diverse case analysis based on the unique perspectives of each of these research respondent groups. As facilitator in the process, I worked to build relationships with participants that flexibly “shift[ed] back and forth along a continuum” of positionality (Mercer, 2007, p. 24). At times taking the position of an insider, while at others that of an outsider, this fluctuation of researcher positionality served not only to yield greater trustworthiness and reliability, but a more descriptive data set.

Further contributing to this data set and to a reduction in potential bias, I followed a protocol for presenting transcripts to respondents for their review and approval. I solicited feedback regarding transcript accuracy, requested approval for use of the data for research purposes, and sought permission to use respondent quotes in publications. Participants engaged in inquiry audits, noting dependability and confirmability that the methodological procedures and subsequent analysis demonstrated both accuracy and trustworthiness. Furthermore, I maintained an audit trail of all meetings, reflexive journal entries, study methods, procedures, communications, and decisions throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Orb et al., 2000).

As the lead researcher, I also established a critical friend, or research associate group. This group included colleagues, friends, and community members who provided additional

feedback for authentication and validity. The research associate process provided an opportunity both to solicit and provide feedback for reflective learning. I calendared research associate meetings in advance, sent reminders several days prior, and followed up with formal minutes and emails of appreciation. I considered it essential that participants knew their value and continued to attend meetings and provide feedback. Finally, I maintained an audit trail, keeping account of all research associate and validation group meetings, reflexive journal entries, study methods, procedures, communications, and decisions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Orb et al., 2000).

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to focus on “respect for persons, beneficence, and justice” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 4), I applied basic ethical principles to this research study. Prior to study commencement I issued letters and flyers to potential participants inviting them to an informational meeting regarding the study and their participation in it. The informational meeting, letters, and flyers included comprehensive and comprehensible information listing the study’s intent, potential costs and risks as well as benefits to participants, and proposed use of results. A supplemental letter included information regarding the responsibilities and requirements of mandated reporting (see Appendix T). Finally, each communication highlighted the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. As the lead researcher, I answered questions and provided clarification about the informed consent process, obtained signatures, and sent signed copies to participants to retain for their records.

Informed consent included a confidentiality agreement, with special consideration for the study’s setting. With just over 900 students, the research site is a small connected community in which students, teachers, and parent/guardians interact both in and outside of the classroom and

the OST SEL program. With confidentiality being essential, I informed participants regarding the limits of, and required signatures indicating their commitment to, confidentiality (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012). Participants maintained confidentiality regarding their interview experiences not only amongst each other, but in the broader school community and public outside of the research study.

For purposes of anonymity, I assigned each student participant a unique identification number, removed names from adult and focus group transcripts, and kept data in password-protected electronic files. As the lead researcher, only I knew to whom the identification numbers belonged. This allowed for greater anonymity and reduced the potential for bias. Finally, teacher, parent/guardian, and other adult participants provided their own informed consent while student participants, as dependents, required minor consent from a parent/guardian, as well as child assent.

Through the informed consent process, I thoroughly documented risks and benefits as I worked to ensure beneficence through a “systematic assessment of risks and benefits” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 8) of study participation. Potential benefits for all participants included instruction, deeper understandings, and focused reflection upon SEL competencies. In addition, study participation provided the ability for participants to contribute to change-making efforts.

Benefits to student participants included the potential for enhanced self-confidence as they provided information about the OST SEL program to a wider audience. Benefits for teacher participants included professional development in SEL competencies; and for parent/guardian participants, a greater understanding of the social-emotional needs and skills of their children. A

potential cost included time spent in focus groups, as well as time for authentication of interview transcripts.

While the study's focus on program improvement sought to minimize uncomfortable emotions and maximize the well-being of the human subjects involved, it is possible that participants experienced discomfort. As the lead researcher, therefore, I carefully attended to focus group procedures and piloted use of data collection tools to minimize risk whenever possible—especially when working with children. Protocols focused on SEL competencies and program design rather than specific emotional experiences. However, working with this vulnerable population necessitated the consideration that student participants might share sensitive information about past experiences that resulted in trauma or pain (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012). I therefore remained flexible, adapting processes in beneficence of all participants, and engaging them in a “continuous renegotiation” (Orb et al., 2000, p. 95) of trust. I also kept meetings casual, encouraged participants to take breaks, and reminded them of their voluntary participation in the study. In the event that a participant reported an experience of abuse or maltreatment, as a mandatory reporter, I prepared to report this information to the appropriate legal authorities. Finally, I ensured that a licensed psychologist remained available to address any other psychological or sociological issues that might arise.

In application of the principle of justice, I considered both social and individual justice in regard to research participation. In this action research process, participants fell into several categories: elementary school students, their teachers, staff and administrators, parents/guardians, and community members. They came from diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. All voluntarily participated and exhibited no unique social or individual vulnerabilities other than the dependent status of the participating students. Interest



and participation in OST SEL program itself could be considered a vulnerability due to the program focus on SEL competencies. However, involvement of student-participants in the action research process might serve to counteract any potential vulnerabilities due to the empowering aspects of research participation.

### **Threats to Validity**

Utilizing Herr and Anderson's (2015) action research goals and validity criteria, the research design incorporated "outcome, process, democratic, catalytic, and dialogic" (p. 67) validity in relation to the goals of the inquiry stance. Adherence to these criteria, as well as the trustworthiness measures suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), provided for a higher level of rigor in the action research process. In checking for credibility, dependability, and confirmability throughout all stages of the process, the action research team and I worked to ensure validity.

With a primary goal of the inquiry stance being knowledge generation for program improvement, Herr and Anderson's (2015) "outcome validity" (p. 67) refers to several outcomes of the research process. As a founding member of the nonprofit organization's OST SEL program, I sought to build knowledge for greater program effectiveness. Participants invested in this goal as it applied to students, their families, and the school and larger community. The continuous cycle of framing and reframing problems related to the inquiry stance resulted in a successful outcome. In fact, this iterative process not only resulted in a stronger program, but the team's deeper knowledge of social-emotional competencies, strategies for developing them, and ideas for broadening this awareness to the larger community.

Through this action research study I also maintained the goal of what Herr and Anderson (2015) referred to as "achievement of action-oriented outcomes" (p. 68). Essential to

achievement of these outcomes, I incorporated process validity—continuously reexamining underlying assumptions and reflecting upon adequacy of the processes in addressing the research stance (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Addressing process validity, I worked towards a successful research outcome through development of productive relationships and ongoing learning for both myself and these key stakeholders.

By engaging in reflective cycles and data triangulation, as well as focus group, research associate, and validation group participants, I experienced extended opportunities to observe, communicate, question, and develop deeper understandings of the issues related to the inquiry and research process (Stringer, 2014). We considered research highlights and growth opportunities, questioned measurement tools, studied positive and negative changes in the data, and examined our own roles in the research process. In linking the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), process validity resulted in the plausibility and integrity, or credibility, of the study.

While addressing outcome and process validity, I also engaged in catalytic validity as I worked with action research participants not only to learn, but to take action, to challenge the status quo of mental health and wellness in the school and community. Catalytic validity refers to the degree to which the researcher and participants build understanding about a social reality and take action to change it (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Linking this concept of catalytic validity to BPNT, the action research team and I looked to “recount a spiraling change in [our] own and...participants’ understandings” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 69).

Student and adult focus group participants reflected upon their knowledge and experiences, shared their thoughts and ideas about development of the five SEL competencies, and contributed ideas to improve the OST SEL program. Research associates, validation group members, and I engaged in an ongoing process of analyzing data trends, focus group themes, and

my reflective journal notes. This allowed us to take action towards program improvement and contribute to a greater goal of building mental health and wellness in the research setting.

Bounded and relevant to the context of the study, the action research team comprised key stakeholders from the elementary school community. In challenging the status quo of mental health and wellness in their own setting, the team demonstrated democratic validity. This form of validity involved a depth of collaboration essential for ethical and social justice: including authentic relationships between all research participants. In relation to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of trustworthiness, democratic validity aligned with the prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the research credibility.

Finally, in utilizing a research methodology—both sound and appropriate to the inquiry stance—the study met the criteria for what Herr and Anderson (2015) referred to as dialogic validity. The action research team and I engaged in the action research cycle by designing actions, collecting and validating findings, and making modifications for the benefit of those involved. To ensure the appropriateness of the methodology, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocated for authentication, triangulation, participant debriefing, diverse case analysis, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I explained the action research methodology utilized to examine and modify an OST SEL program implemented by a northern California-based nonprofit organization. In order to provide context for the reader, I discussed the study's purpose and inquiry stance, research design, and participants involved. In addition, I explained the data collection procedures and rationale for their use. In the following chapter, I present the findings including data trends, identified themes, participant quotes, my reflexive journal notes, and

questions posed by the action research team, and connect them to the action research process focused on improvement of the OST SEL program.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

### **Introduction**

This chapter contains the results of the action research study designed to examine a northern California-based nonprofit organization's OST SEL program in order to determine actions and interventions that might lead to greater program effectiveness. Based on the inquiry stance of program improvement, the data include pre-program and end-of-program student and staff survey data in addition to adult and student focus group data.

This chapter also includes discussion of the data analysis process, use of descriptive statistics in examination of survey data, and the coding process involved. Additionally, it contains the information I collected in validation group and research associate meetings as well as the ongoing thought process documented in my reflexive journal: all contributing to data triangulation. Tables and figures highlight relevant themes identified during coding of transcribed focus group recordings as well as quantitative survey data. Finally, student and adult quotes provide evidence to support the data and further inform the iterative action research process.

### **Focus Group Data**

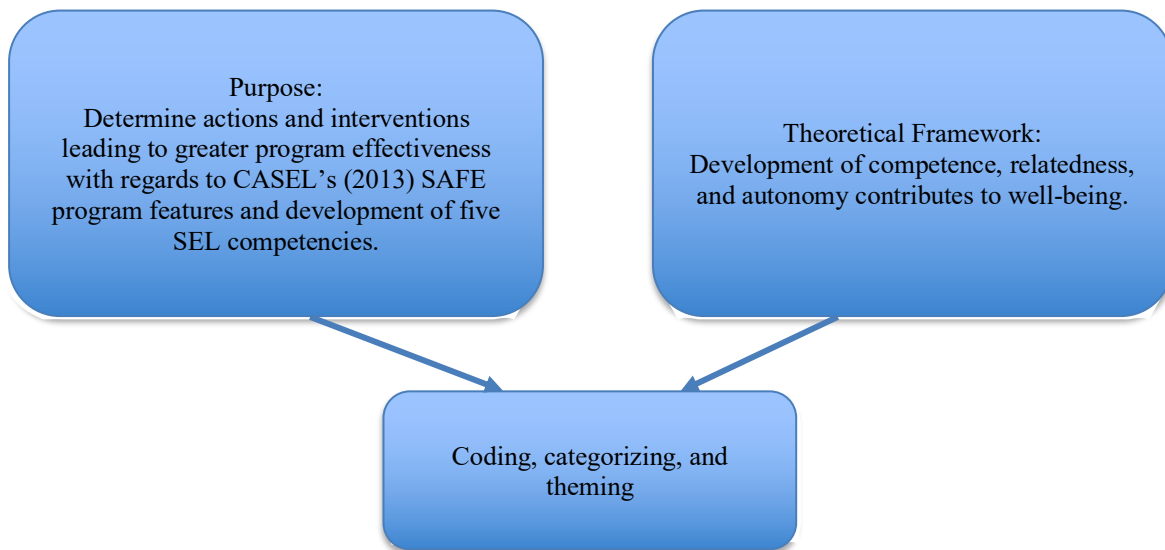
As part of the action research study methodology, I used data from adult and student focus groups. Each 45-minute focus group meeting followed identified protocols with prompts relating to the five SEL competencies and student application of them, program design and effectiveness, and potential areas for program improvement. As the study's lead researcher, I transcribed, edited, and worked with participants to confirm accuracy of both pre-program and

end-of-program focus group data. I then coded, categorized, and themed the data to provide information for the action research process.

### **Pre-Program Adult Focus Group Data**

The first adult focus group took place eight days prior to commencement of the OST SEL program at the elementary school research site. Focus group members included teachers, parents, and site administrators. All participants signed an informed consent form, participated voluntarily in the research study, and agreed to audio recording. As the lead researcher, I opened the focus group meeting by asking participants to spend a few minutes reflecting on several questions designed to inspire thinking about students, adults, SEL competencies, and the OST SEL program. An additional probe required participants to think of questions they had about the program, the study, or any other related topic. I then utilized these reflections, along with the adult focus group protocol, to engage participants in the focus group conversation.

Upon completion of the adult focus group, I reviewed, edited, and presented transcribed data to the participants to confirm accuracy. I then began the data analysis as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), by first reviewing the purpose of the study, considering the theoretical framework of SDT and BPNT, and coding and categorizing the data into themes. Beginning with open coding, I looked at specific words and ideas, noted surprises and interesting pieces of information, and examined frequency and “extensiveness” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 136)—relating to how many participants said the same thing. From there, I constructed categories for the identified codes, looking for emerging and recurring patterns across the data. Figure 2 illustrates the focus group data analysis process.



*Figure 2.* Focus group data analysis process.

**Themes.** Through the open coding process, I found several recurring words and phrases which I then sorted and grouped into categories and eventual themes. Figure 3 depicts sorted and categorized words and phrases and identified themes.



Figure 3. Pre-program adult focus group categories and themes.

Visible in Figure 3, adult focus group participants indicated their observations of student confusion when it comes to SEL competencies especially in the areas of self-management and self-awareness. They also shared their perceptions of school-site instruction as surface level and that students did not seem to internalize taught SEL skills.

***Theoretical framework and identified themes.*** In additional analysis of adult focus group themes, I included related participant quotes. These provided deeper guidance for the inquiry process and examination of the theoretical framework's elements of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. I looked for specific connections between these basic psychological needs, self-awareness, self-management, and the SAFE program features identified by CASEL



(2013). I also considered the CDE's (2018a) Guiding Principle 4, Family and Community Partnerships, and potential modifications for greater program effectiveness and improved student well-being related to the elements of BPNT.

*Self-awareness.* Throughout the first adult focus group, participants referred to student application of self-awareness skills. They shared that SEL instruction within the school setting provided an opportunity for students to learn how to reflect on themselves and their actions, but that—whether due to lack of consistency of instruction, developmental appropriateness, or the need to be more explicit and focused—students must become more self-aware. One participant shared, “I think it’s a topic that they don’t know much about at that age, developmentally. They’re just trying to figure out who they are and how they fit in the dynamic of the classroom with their peers.”

The sentiment that elementary students are trying to figure out who they are in relation to their peers aligns to BPNT and the element of relatedness. Humans, as social beings, establish who they are and how they behave in relation to others, and they want to do well (Ryan & Deci, 2017; TED, 2014). In addition, in seeking to do well and develop greater competence and autonomy, another participant spoke of her desire for students and teachers to work collaboratively and for teachers to teach and model how to self-reflect. In her words, “your actions...people perceive. It’s kind of like a mirror. What you’re [teacher] putting off, they’re [students] seeing and that’s how they’re reading you.” She proceeded to say that if students learn what they are “portraying, people are reading that,” they can reflect and modify their actions and behaviors.

*Self-management.* Adult focus group participants also identified self-management as a theme requiring a deeper level of student instruction. This theme aligns to BPNT’s elements of

competence, relatedness, and autonomy and their overall connection to human well-being.

Several participants reported that elementary students often experience frustration and do not know how to express it. This tends to result in yelling, crying, or other externalizing behaviors.

As one of the focus group participants stated, “My oldest, he can be very quiet sometimes and he won’t say what he’s feeling. He gets really frustrated and he doesn’t know how to...express that.” But if we teach students self-management skills, they are better able to “navigate being a member of a group...a classroom or of a community, society.” And, as one adult respondent shared, they can determine how to “coexist respectfully, peacefully.”

*SAFE program features and Guiding Principle 4.* Finally, in further looking at CASEL’s (2013) SAFE program features and CDE’s (2018a) Guiding Principle 4—family and community partnerships—as a theme identified in the first adult focus group, participants referred to the school-site’s implementation of SEL instruction, its impact on students, and the importance of involving families to better integrate the work of the OST SEL program highlighted in this study. They repeatedly referred to SEL as “a great topic that they need to learn about.” They also indicated that at the site level, not everyone is teaching SEL. The instruction is “not very deep,” but “it is the goal for us to have a school that has the tools to deal with the social issues that arise.” In addition, they indicated a desire to get better at teaching and modeling SEL competencies.

In the quest to improve their SEL instruction, adult focus group participants inquired about the OST SEL curriculum and how teachers and parents at the site could partner and learn more about the topics addressed so that they could support students in implementing the same strategies. One focus group participant indicated how insightful it would be to have knowledge of the content and tools, “You could use it for everybody.” These comments pointed to their

desire to build competence and autonomy in SEL instruction. Here again, I noted alignment to these elements of BPNT and the potential for greater student well-being through program improvements resulting from the action research process.

### **Pre-Program Student Focus Group Data**

In addition to the adult focus groups, I conducted student pre-program and end-of-program focus groups. The 45-minute pre-program student focus group convened seven days prior to commencement of the OST SEL program. Participants included third through fifth grade students who attended the program in the past two years as well as students enrolled in the winter 2020 program session. After soliciting consent, I recorded the focus group meeting, transcribed and edited the recording, and worked with participants to confirm accuracy.

**Themes.** Taking the transcribed, edited, and authenticated transcripts from the student focus groups, I followed the same open coding protocol I utilized for the adult focus group data. I searched for frequently and extensively used words and phrases, and concepts related to the research stance. After sorting and categorizing these words and phrases, I developed several themes. Figure 4 depicts the pre-program student focus group categories and themes identified from pre-program student focus group data.

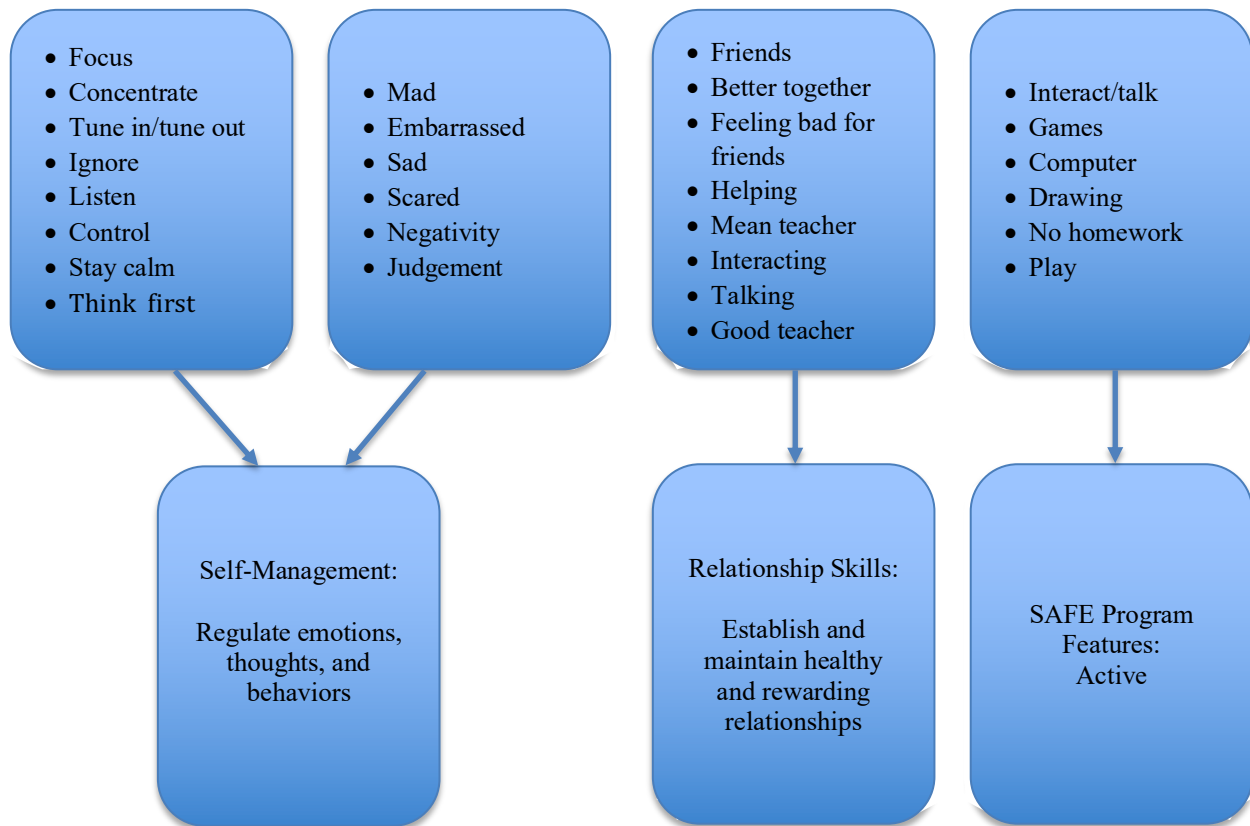


Figure 4. Pre-program student focus group categories and themes.

According to these themes, student focus group participants shared their understanding of self-management and relationship skills as well as their desire for the OST SEL program to include the CASEL SAFE active program feature.

***Theoretical framework and identified themes.*** I used BPNT as a lens to further examine themes and gathered participant quotes to assist in defining next steps for the action research study. Like the adult focus group participants, students identified self-management as a necessary SEL competency. They also discussed relationship skills and their desire for the OST SEL program to include active learning.

*Self-management.* Delving deeper into the theme of self-management, I noted the fact that student focus group participants identified a range of emotions from anger to embarrassment and sadness. They also talked about the impact of peer and adult negativity and judgement on their emotional states. One student commented, “When too much negativity is being brought down on me, I usually just cry.” Another student remarked that “When people are...spreading rumors about me...it’s really embarrassing, then I just get really mad.”

The students also discussed strategies they use when angry or upset. Several students mentioned ignoring negativity and focusing on something else, but admitted it is difficult for them. One student commented that it is really hard to control himself when he is angry, and “that’s really been happening a lot.” Despite the various self-management strategies referenced, students seemed to struggle using these tools effectively. Competence, as an element of BPNT, seemed to be lacking.

*Relationship skills.* In addition to self-management, focus group data pointed to relationship skills as another theme. When first asked about relationships, student participants referred to friendships. They discussed being “better together” and incidents in which they demonstrated empathy towards a peer experiencing public embarrassment or what they referred to as meanness from a teacher. One student commented that sometimes:

One of my classmates says something bad to one of my friends. So then because I have been called things before, a lot even by my parents...so then I help them...I talk to them and...I say that I have been through this.

Student participants exhibited BPNT’s element of relatedness as they referred to helping peers feel better when upset or hurt.

Evidence of relatedness also surfaced when I prompted students about their relationships with adults. Focusing on teacher-student relationships, student focus group participants

described these as either positive or negative. When students perceived their teachers as unfair or mean, they described those relationships as negative. One student commented, “In my old school in third grade, we did not have a good relationship because...she’s [the teacher] really mean to other kids.” On the other hand, students considered teacher-student relationships positive when they perceived their teachers as kind, supportive, respectful, and flexible. As another student participant remarked, “With me and my teacher...if she needs...to talk about something with me, she...calls me over to her desk or...she’ll just come to my desk or something.” He appreciated that she did not call him out in front of others and discreetly offered support.

*SAFE program features.* In terms of the final student focus group theme and looking through the lens of BPNT’s element of competence, the majority of student participants expressed their ideas and desires for the OST SEL program to be active. They referenced games, drawing, physical activity, and interaction. One suggested “interact[ing]” with each other, and that “talking to other people is fun.” Another student suggested, “...maybe we could go outside and play and do activities that we can use for energy.” Still another student said his choice would be to “have a blank piece of paper and we can each...draw what we’re thinking about and what we’re having problems on and how to fix it.” Only one of the students said, “I have no ideas. I’m clueless.”

### **Pre-Program Focus Group Data and the Action Research Cycle**

Because “data analysis is best done in conjunction with data collection” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204), and pre-program focus group data would inform this formal iteration of the study, I combined both adult and student focus group themes for additional analysis. This combination resulted in the following themes: self-management, relationship skills, self-

awareness, and CASEL's (2013) SAFE program features with a focus on the CDE's (2018a)

Guiding Principle 4. I further examined the themes by reviewing my reflexive journal notes and shared all data with the action research validation group and research associates. The resulting discussions and analysis assisted in identifying actions to increase effectiveness of the OST SEL program.

**Reflexive journal, validation group, and research associate input.** By maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the study, I documented key learnings, new ideas, and comments about the action research process. I also looked carefully at the emerging themes and brought all information to the validation group and research associates in order to challenge preconceptions and biases, further triangulate the data, and round out the developing research story. Utilizing IRB-approved data protocols and keeping minutes, the action research team and I started each session with a progress report. We engaged in critical reflection about the data, provisional findings and possible related actions, researcher positionality, and trustworthiness. We looked critically at the coding, categorizing, and theming process as well as my reflexive journal notes in order to ensure a thorough data review. This process guided our thinking about potential modifications to the OST SEL program.

After the initial adult focus group, for example, I noted in my reflexive journal the theme related to CASEL's (2013) SAFE program features and the need for family and community partnerships as highlighted in the CDE's (2018a) Guiding Principle 4. By identifying this theme, the team and I considered modifying the communication loop from the OST SEL program to teachers and parent/guardians of participating students. This might be a simple email following each session or even a post on the organization's social media platform. Another option for more explicitly focusing on integrating SEL across the school community might be

implementation of staff professional learning or a wellness community of practice running parallel to the student program. The validation group, research associates, and I compiled our notes to later utilize in planning for program improvement.

In order to address the SAFE program feature of activeness that emerged from the student focus group data, my reflexive journal notes included student ideas about increasing interaction and talk time, building in a coloring or art connection, and including learning games as part of the curriculum. After bringing the themes and reflexive journal notes to the validation group and research associates, we considered modifications and curriculum refinements to implement in the action research cycle. I describe the details of these actions in Chapter 6.

### **End-of-Program Adult Focus Group Data**

At the conclusion of the OST SEL program, adult focus group participants again convened and provided input regarding student understanding and application of the five SEL competencies, strengths and challenges of the program, and specific observations of students who attended. After recording, transcribing, editing, and seeking participant authentication, I coded, categorized, and themed the end-of-program focus group data, compared it to pre-program themes, and used it for informed decision-making for future action research iterations.

**Themes.** Through open coding, sorting, categorizing, and theming of the adult focus group data, I identified self-management and the need for universal and integrated SEL instruction in schools, families, and the larger community. Figure 5 depicts the categories and themes.



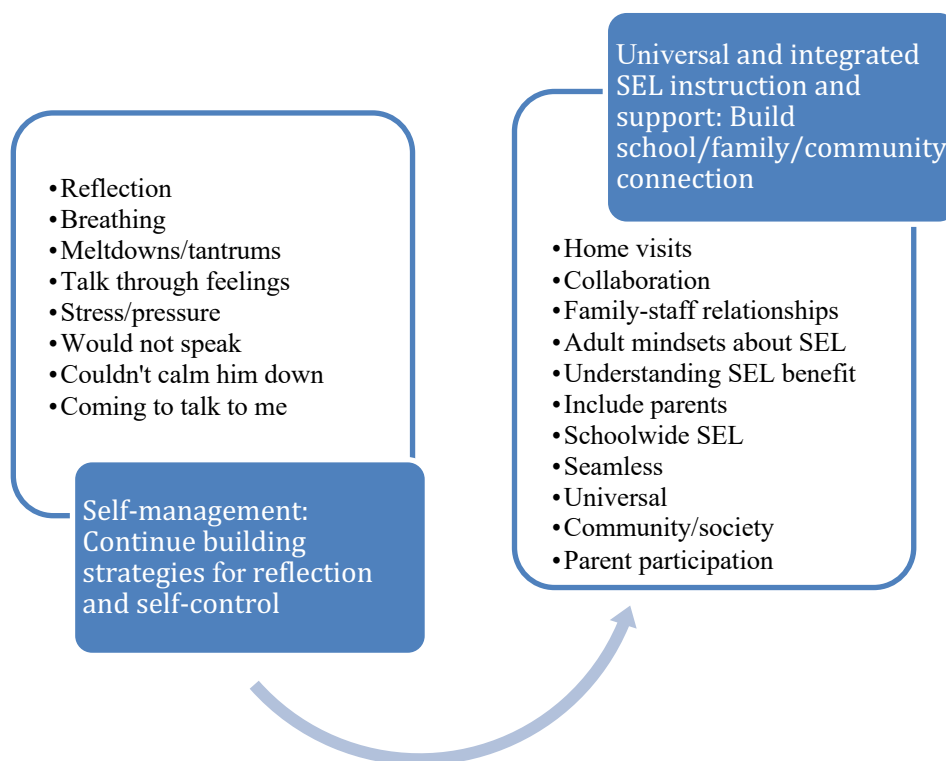


Figure 5. End-of-program adult focus group categories and themes.

From the themes depicted in Figure 5, adult focus group participants shared their comments and ideas related to self-management as well as program improvement through implementation of universal and integrated SEL instruction.

**Theoretical framework and identified themes.** Using the lens of BPNT, I reviewed adult focus group transcripts and collected participant comments to aid in deeper understanding of the themes. While self-management emerged as a pre-program focus group theme, end-of-program focus group participant comments emphasized different observations of student application of this skill. In addition, the need for integrated and universal SEL instruction emerged as another theme. Intrigued by these findings, I wanted to learn more about participant perspectives and

experiences and connect them to the components of BPNT that might lead to greater student well-being.

*Self-management.* While several of the focus group participants commented on student improvement in self-management after participation in the program, they mentioned the need for other students in the school population to learn these skills. One parent, commenting on her son's learning, stated:

I think the self-management days were really good for him and gave him some language and tools...he takes a breath and then he kind of makes this face...but he's controlling his emotion. It's been really hard, but he's getting better.

Other participants shared the need for self-management instruction schoolwide. "There's more and more kids like this. Because they're getting pressure all the way around to be up here when they just need to be kids," commented another participant. According to this adult focus group theme, I noted the need to continue teaching self-reflection, breathing and mindfulness, and the importance of expressing one's thoughts and feelings in order to better develop BPNT's element of competence in all students.

*Integrated and universal SEL.* In addition to a continued focus on self-management skills, adult focus group data pointed to integrated and universal SEL instruction beyond the OST SEL program. These participants suggested that SEL instruction would be more effective if consistently taught, practiced, and shared with family and community stakeholders. Aligned to CDE (2018a) Guiding Principle 4 and the concept of family and community partnerships, one teacher participant remarked, "You know, we have students participating, we're participating. But I think the missing piece is to get families to know that it's an element of school." Another shared his perspective stating, "Everybody needs it. Everybody will benefit..." And, a third agreed by saying, "It's only going to benefit the school, the individual...and the community."

All focus group participants agreed that SEL instruction, practice, and application must be universal for greater impact on student learning and competence in SEL skill application: “Like we want everybody to add and subtract. We want everybody to be kind and respectful.”

### **End-of-Program Student Focus Group Data**

Keeping these adult focus group themes in mind, I conducted the end-of-program student focus group. This meeting took place seven days after conclusion of the program with the intent that program experiences, learning, and practices all remained fresh in the minds of participants. I then combined the adult and student focus group themes and brought the information to the action research validation group and research associates.

**Themes.** After transcribing, editing, and authenticating transcripts with student focus group participants, I engaged in the coding and theming process. Figure 6 depicts the sorted categories and subsequent themes.

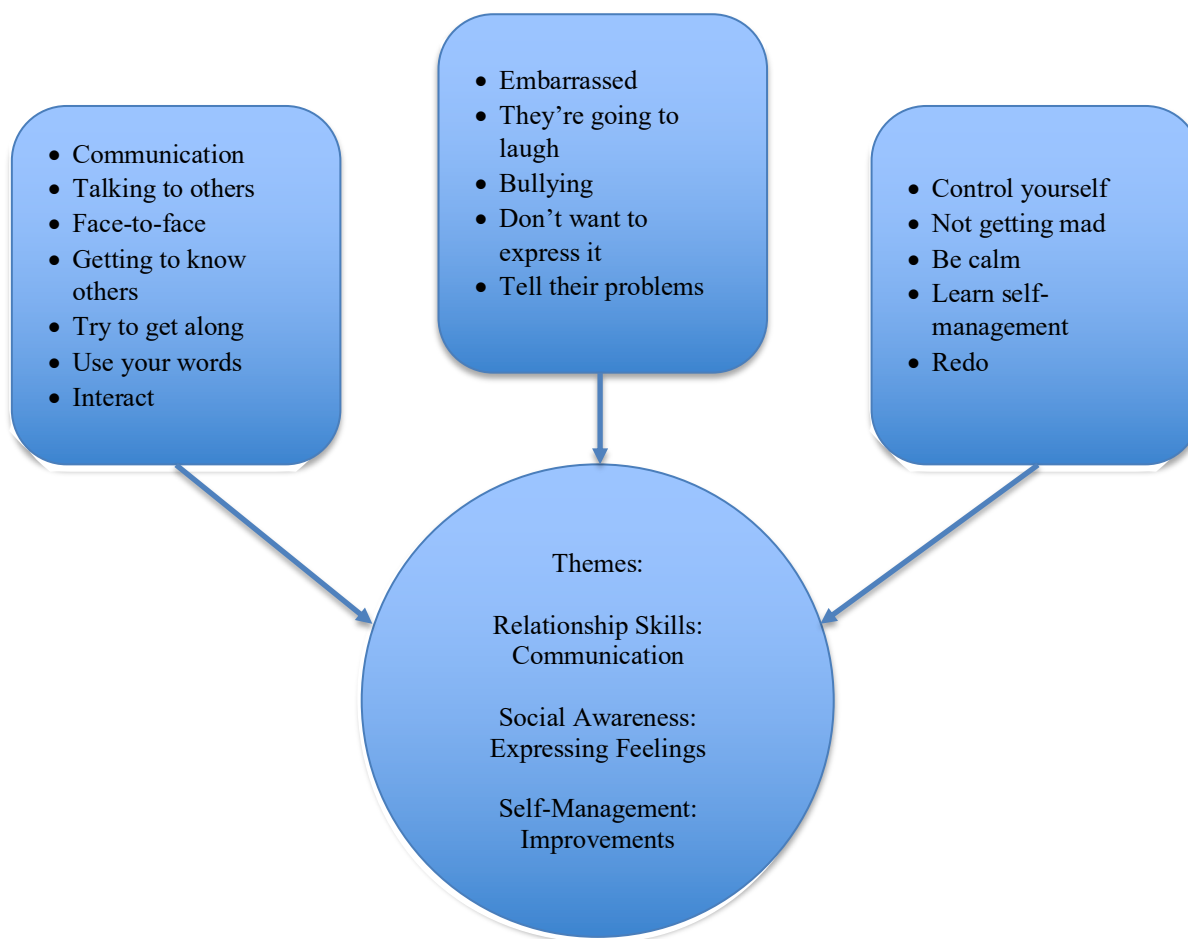


Figure 6. Student focus group categories and themes.

While analysis of the student focus group transcript revealed information ranging from their opinions of the brain-booster snacks to their suggestions of alternatives to some of the mindful art options, the analysis also pointed to several key themes that continued to guide the ongoing action research process. Themes included relationship skills with an emphasis on communication, social awareness and expression of one's feelings, and self-management with regard to improvement.

***Theoretical framework and identified themes.*** Viewing these themes through the lens of BPNT and the elements of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, I reread the student focus

group transcripts looking for participant comments that would further contribute to guiding program improvement. Again, the themes matched the CASEL (2017) SEL competencies, but the underlying components differed slightly from those I previously labeled with the same broad terms of social awareness, relationship skills, and self-management. Student focus group participants, for example, spoke of self-management growth and the need for peers to also improve by learning more about the topic. They spoke of relationship skills in terms of their own learning about effective communication and shared about social awareness in terms of their own experiences, feelings, and the idea of expressing feelings in order to have their needs met.

*Relationship skills.* Student focus group participants heavily emphasized their learning about the topic of communication. Not only did they share key understandings about general communication and the need to listen when others are speaking, but also expressed new understandings about how to interact with others in challenging situations. One student, commenting about general communication, stated, “I learned not to talk at the same time. Then you won’t hear each other.” In reference to addressing challenging behaviors, another student shared, “I learned how to interact when something is happening to you,” and “I learned what to do when a bully comes. I know what to do now because I learned it. I knew some ways. But I didn’t know all of the ways.”

Building upon this comment, another student shared, “When someone is mean to me, before I did the program I just walked away and kept playing. But now I still walk away, but I go tell...a teacher or parent.” Finally, in reference to relationship skills, another student participant commented on his new understanding of support-seeking. He learned not to keep things to himself, and that by expressing himself and his needs, he can get help:

Sometimes people ignore others because they don’t want to talk about something, but they shouldn’t. If they learn communication, then they could...communicate by telling

them their problems and their friends could help them with their problems and try to fix it.

*Social awareness.* Looking more critically at the focus group transcript, I wanted to see if student comments provided a deeper understanding of their social awareness skills, what they learned, and any other thoughts or ideas they had. Student comments revealed their concern about how others perceive them—both peers and adults. One student commented that her peers fear sharing their problems with others; “They don’t want to express it. They’re too embarrassed probably...If they tell their problem, other people will laugh at them.” Another student remarked, “They think we’re going to laugh at them...And they’re going to be bullied because of maybe it was just a silly thing they’ve done and they don’t want to talk about it. And if it spreads...then everybody starts bullying.” They shared their own experiences of similar situations when this happened to them, with one student exclaiming, “It was the worst!” Finally, they shared that they know their peers are often afraid to share what is going on with them because “...they’re going to probably get in trouble.”

*Self-management.* The final theme emerging from the student focus group data was self-management. In reviewing the transcript, I found that students referred not only to their own learning but suggested that peers could also benefit from self-management skills. In reference to student learning, one participant remarked, “I can get calm. I’m usually not calm.” Another stated, “I learned how to interact when something is happening to you, practice not getting mad,” and to “remind yourself not to get really angry at the person.”

In speaking of peers, they remarked, “Other kids need to learn self-management.” They talked about classroom experiences and how those experiences impact them. One participant shared, “...some of my friends don’t know how to control their selves. So then when they get

out of control, it bothers me sometimes.” They agreed that other students need to be taught “...how to not get mad and just be calm.”

### **End-of-Program Focus Group Data and the Action Research Cycle**

In review of end-of-program focus group data collected from both adults and students, I found that both groups identified self-management as a key theme. In addition, students identified social awareness and relationship skills and adults emphasized ideas for program improvement related to integrated and universal SEL. I took this information into account as I proceeded in data analysis, reviewed my reflexive journal, and shared data with the action research validation group and research associates. The combined data and related discussions contributed to the inquiry focus on program improvement.

**Reflexive journal, validation group, and research associate input.** In triangulating the data, I combined focus group data with notes I compiled in my reflexive journal and brought these to the action research team. At each of the end-of-program meetings, we followed IRB-approved protocols beginning with a progress report and proceeding to critical review of the provisional data. We looked for surprises, trends and patterns, alignment of parent and student data, and how findings might inform the action research cycle.

For the theme of self-management, both adult and student focus group participant data pointed to the importance of this SEL competency. Students discussed their growth and the need for peers to learn more about these skills. Adult comments aligned with those of the students, highlighting experiences in which they observed students applying new skills, and the need for continued efforts in this area. The validation group, research associates, and I questioned the specific actions taken to build these skills and what more we could do to support the development of self-management in both students who participated in the OST SEL program as

well as their non-participating peers. These questions provided the basis for further discussion of the findings in Chapter 6.

Providing a foundation for discussion and deeper analysis, the validation group, research associates, and I also considered questions related to the theme of program improvement through integrated and universal SEL instruction. We analyzed remarks lifted from adult end-of-program transcripts in addition to my reflexive journal notes. Prior to coding the transcripts, for example, my initial reflexive journal notes included what I considered to be the opinion of the group that SEL instruction needs to be universal; schoolwide, family-wide, and community-wide. My notes emphasized what participants pointed out as the importance of family partnerships, the need to invite families into classrooms, and the value of community and family nights. In collaboration with the validation group and research associates, we noted the connection between the theme of universality with the concept raised in the pre-program adult focus group about student internalization of SEL competencies. We raised the following questions: How could we use a universal platform to help students deeply understand and apply SEL competencies? What would be the role of the OST SEL program in developing such a platform?

Finally, reviewing the student focus group themes of social awareness and relationship skills, I looked back at my reflexive journal, shared my initial thoughts, and asked for additional insights from the validation group and research associates. The students, for example, spoke of their fear of sharing thoughts and experiences with others due to potential consequences of embarrassment or punishment. Did the fact that they chose not to share feelings have more to do with self-management, social awareness, or relationship skills? Based on discussions with the validation group and research associates, we considered that looking at SEL competency development in isolation may not be as useful as a more integrated approach, especially in



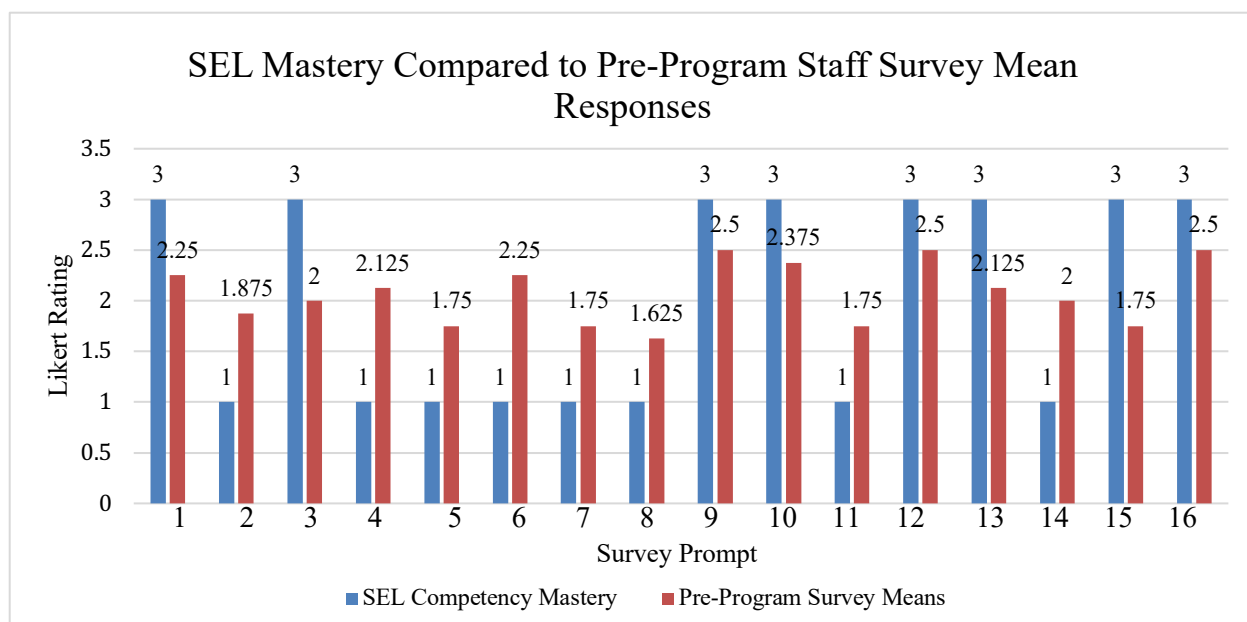
relation to the study's findings. This idea provided further guidance for discussion and planning for program improvement.

### **Survey Data**

As part of the action research study, I collected survey data from staff and students involved in the OST SEL program. Teachers of program participants completed pre-program and end-of-program surveys by rating their perceptions of student application of the five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017)—self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Students completed pre-program and end-of-program surveys responding to prompts based on self-perception of their application of the SEL competencies. They also completed a second survey responding to prompts regarding their opinions of the importance of demonstrating the five competencies.

#### **Pre-Program Staff Surveys**

After collecting minor consent from parent/guardians and child assent from students, I solicited staff consent to participate in the study. Their role was to respond to surveys for each student enrolled in the OST SEL program. No more than two weeks prior to the program start date, staff members completed the 16-item 3-point Likert survey by indicating their perception of student frequency of engaging in SEL-related actions. Responses with a score of 1 indicated “always true,” 2 indicated “sometimes true,” and 3 indicated “rarely true.” After compiling staff survey data, I compared mean responses for each prompt to scores indicating SEL mastery. Based on prompt wording—positive or negative—I assigned mastery scores of either 1 or 3. One represented a high score for positively worded prompts and 3 represented a high score for negatively worded prompts. Figure 7 displays the comparison of staff pre-program survey mean responses to SEL mastery.



*Note.* SEL skill mastery is indicated by a score of 1 for positively worded prompts and a score of 3 for negatively worded prompts. Mastery scores are depicted alongside 16-item staff survey response mean scores indicating student application of SEL competencies.

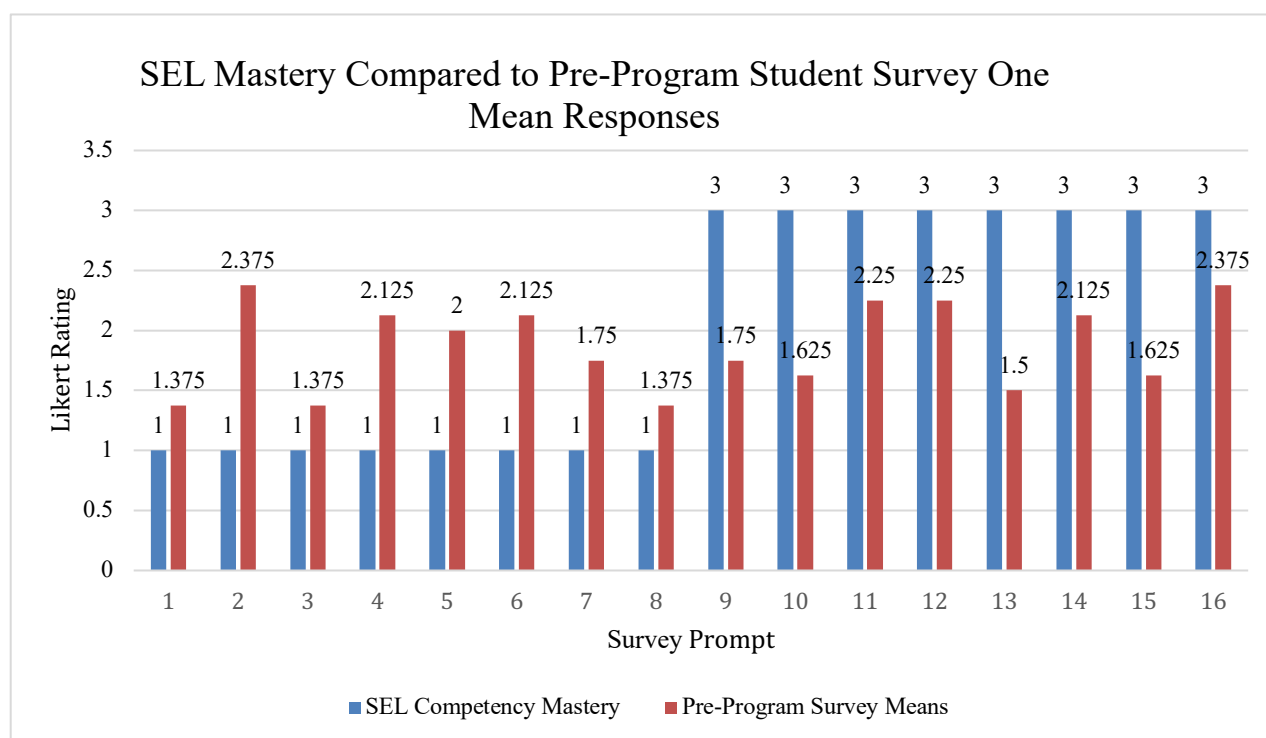
*Figure 7.* SEL mastery compared to pre-program staff survey mean responses.

As the bar graph depicts, staff responses indicated perceived student strengths and opportunities for SEL growth. The greatest strengths, shown by the smallest differences of .5 between indicators of skill mastery and mean survey responses, corresponded to prompts 9, 12, and 16. These prompts highlighted student SEL competencies in the areas of relationship skills, self-awareness, and social awareness. Responses to prompt 6 indicated the greatest SEL growth opportunity—with a difference of 1.125 between mastery versus staff mean response—for relationship skills with regards to seeking support from others.

### **Pre-Program Student Surveys**

In addition to the pre-program staff surveys, I collected two pre-program surveys from each student enrolled in the OST SEL program. After obtaining minor consent and child assent, I solicited student responses during the first day of the OST SEL program. On Student Survey 1,

I sought information regarding student perception of their own frequency of engaging in SEL-related actions modeled after the staff 3-point Likert scale; 1 indicated “always true,” 2 indicated “sometimes true,” and 3 indicated “rarely true.” After computing mean scores for each prompt, I compared them to SEL mastery. For positively worded prompts 1 through 8, a high score of 1 indicated SEL mastery. For negatively worded prompts 9 through 16, 3 was high and indicated mastery. Figure 8 displays pre-program Student Survey 1 mean response scores compared to SEL mastery.



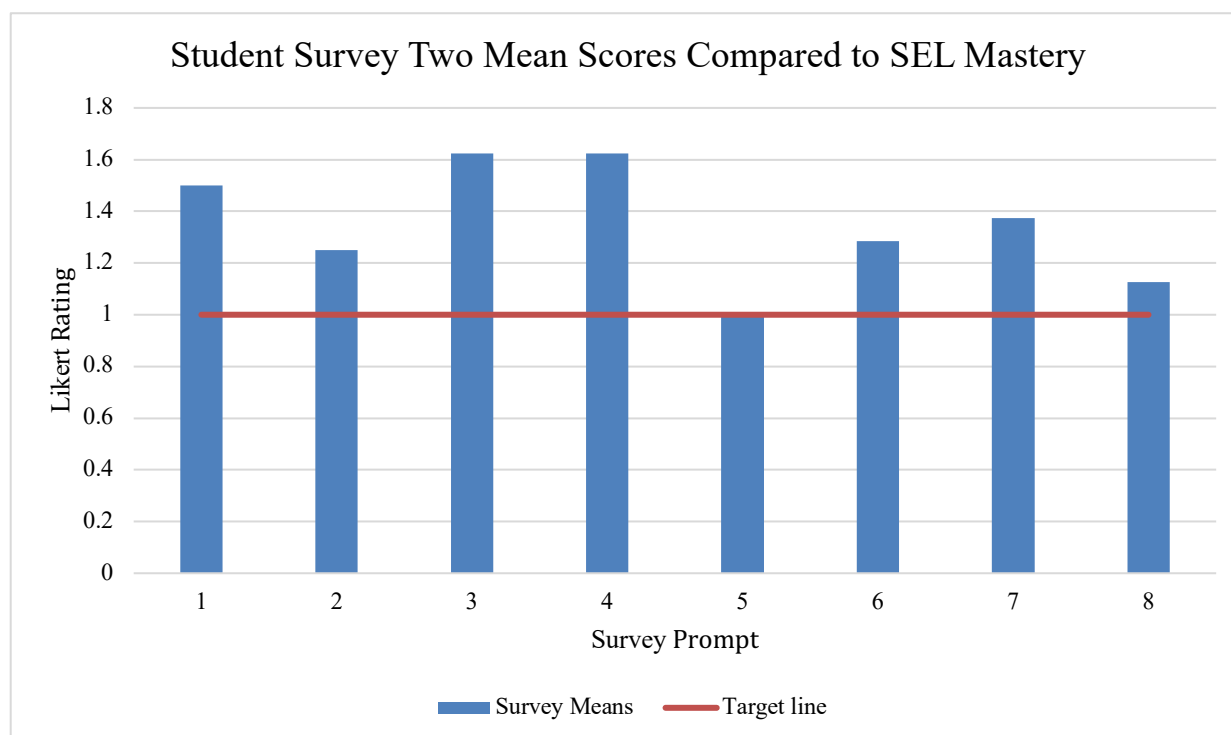
*Note.* SEL skill mastery is indicated by a score of 1 for positively worded prompts and a score of 3 for negatively worded prompts. Mastery scores are depicted alongside Student Survey 1 response mean scores indicating student application of SEL competencies.

*Figure 8.* SEL mastery compared to pre-program staff survey mean responses.

In review of the data represented on the graph, pre-program Student Survey 1 results point to the greatest strengths indicated by the smallest differences of .38 between SEL mastery

and mean survey response, for prompts 1, 3, and 8. Aligning these prompts to the five SEL competencies, students perceived their strengths to be in the areas of social awareness, self-awareness, and relationship skills. Responses to prompts 2, 10, 13, and 15 indicate SEL growth opportunities with differences between mastery and mean responses ranging from 1.375 to 1.5. These corresponded to student perception of their own self-management skills.

Student Survey 2 included prompts for students to indicate their opinions of the importance of particular SEL competencies. Using a 3-point Likert scale, 1 indicated “very important,” 2 indicated “somewhat important,” and 3 indicated “not important at all.” After computing mean scores for each prompt, I compared these to a target or mastery score of 1. Figure 9 displays mean student opinion responses compared to the target SEL mastery score.



*Note.* For all Student Survey 2 prompts, 1 represented a target or mastery score related to student opinion of SEL competency importance.

*Figure 9.* Student survey 2 mean scores rating SEL importance compared to mastery.

In review of the data depicted, student mean responses indicated an overall opinion that all five SEL competencies are either somewhat or very important. According to student responses to prompt 5, they perceived responsible decision-making as most important with a mean score of 1. Of the other skills, students still rated self-awareness and relationship skills as relatively high but least important of the competencies with mean scores of 1.625 for prompts 3 and 4.

### **Student and Staff Pre-Program Survey Comparisons**

Working with the validation group and research associates, I reviewed all adult and student survey data for perceived strengths and opportunities for growth, by aligning survey prompts, related SEL competencies, and mean responses. While each set of survey results indicated strengths and opportunities for SEL growth, aligned data for all three sets of pre-program surveys showed a growth opportunity in the area of self-management. Table 2 shows the alignment of pre-program staff, Student Survey 1, and Student Survey 2 prompts, all indicating a growth opportunity for self-management.

Table 2  
*Pre-Program Staff, Student Survey 1, and Student Survey 2 Prompt Alignment*

Prompt Alignment
Staff Survey
Prompt 4- This student seeks support from others.
Prompt 6 - This student shares his/her feelings with others.
Student Survey 1
Prompt 13 - I keep feelings to myself.
Prompt 15 - I'd rather solve a problem on my own than ask for help.
Student Survey 2
Prompt 4 - How important is it to be able to share your feelings?

### **End-of-Program Staff Surveys**

After completion of the four-week OST SEL program, I distributed end-of-program surveys to both staff and students. Protocol required that staff surveys be completed and returned no more than one week following program completion. After collecting completed surveys, I removed all identifying information, compiled the data into spreadsheets, converted to delimited text files, and uploaded to RStudio (2020). Due to the small sample size, I conducted simple descriptive statistics and examined pre-program and end-of-program mean scores, the raw difference between those scores, and the percentage difference.

To further analyze the initial data, I conducted a thorough investigation of each survey prompt, noting wording as either positive or negative. For example, prompt 2, "This student can calm him/herself when angry or upset," consisted of positive wording, while prompt 10, "This student has difficulty controlling him/herself when angry or upset," read negatively. In order to compare the data accurately, I used a simple formula to flip the scores for negatively worded

prompts. From there, I computed mean scores and compared pre-program and end-of-program responses, the difference, percentage difference, and percentage change for each prompt response. I aligned these to assessed SEL competencies and noted the direction of change as positive, negative, or no change. Table 3 lists survey prompts, pre-program and end-of-program responses, calculated differences, related SEL competencies, and direction of change.

Table 3  
*Staff Survey Prompts, Pre- and End-of-Program Mean Scores, Differences, Related SEL Competencies, and Direction of Change*

	Prompt	Pre Mean	End Mean	Diff	Average % Change	SEL Competency	Direction of Change (+/-/no change)
1.	This student makes decisions without considering pros and cons.	2.25	2.125	-0.125	-6	RDM	-
2.	This student can calm him/herself when angry or upset.	2.125	2.25	0.125	6	SM	+
3.	This student follows what his/her friends say to do.	2	2.25	0.25	13	RS, RDM	+
4.	This student shares his/her feelings with others.	1.875	1.875	0	0	SOA, RS	No change
5.	This student thinks carefully before making decisions.	2.25	2.125	-0.125	-6	RDM	-
6.	This student seeks support from others.	1.75	1.875	0.125	6	RS, SM	+
7.	This student communicates easily with peers and adults.	2.25	2.25	0	0	SOA, RS	No change
8.	This student stands up for him/herself.	2.375	2.5	0.125	5	RS, RDM	+
9.	This student has difficulty communicating with others.	2.5	2.375	-0.125	-5	SOA, RS	-
10.	This student has difficulty controlling him/herself when angry or upset.	2.375	2.625	0.25	11	SM	+
11.	This student recognizes when others are happy or sad.	2.25	2.5	0.25	11	SOA	+
12.	This student does not recognize his/her strengths.	2.5	2.25	-0.25	-10	SFA	-
13.	This student keeps feelings to him/herself.	2.125	2.125	0	0	SOA, RS	No change
14.	This student knows his/her own strengths.	2	2.25	0.25	13	SFA	+
15.	This student has difficulty seeking support.	1.75	2.25	0.5	29	RS, SM	+
16.	This student has difficulty understanding how others feel.	2.5	2.375	-0.125	-5	SOA	-

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), Responsible Decision-Making (RDM), Social Awareness (SOA), and Self-Awareness (SFA).



Analyzing specific scores and percentages of change, I noted positive change in staff responses for prompts 2, 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14, and 15. Of the seven prompt responses showing movement in a positive direction, the greatest percentage change was for prompt 15 referring to student support-seeking with an average percentage change of 29. As for the number of times each SEL competency showed positive movement in relation to a prompt, all five competencies were represented with the most frequently reported being relationship and self-management skills. For responses to prompts showing change in a negative direction—prompts 1, 5, 9, 12, and 16—prompt 12 showed the greatest average percentage change referring to student ability to recognize his/her own strengths, with -10%. For the number of times each SEL competency showed negative movement in relation to a prompt, fairly equal distribution existed between all five competencies, with the exception of self-management. There were no changes for prompts 4, 7, and 13. SEL competencies associated with these prompts included relationship skills and social awareness. Table 4 shows the alignment of survey prompts by direction of change, related competency, percentage change, and a ranked summary showing each competency and number of reported changes.

Table 4

*Staff Survey Prompts Aligned by Direction of Change, Related SEL Competency, Average Percentage Change, and Ranked SEL Competency Summary*

Direction of Change	Prompt	Related SEL Competency	Average % Change	SEL Competency Results Summary (Ranked)
Positive Change	2	SM	6%	RS - 4
	3	RS, RDM	13%	SM - 4
	6	RS, SM	6%	RDM - 2
	8	RS, RDM	5%	SOA - 1
	10	SM	11%	SFA - 1
	11	SOA	11%	
	14	SFA	13%	
	15	RS, SM	29%	
Negative Change	1	RDM	-6%	RDM - 2
	5	RDM	-6%	SOA - 2
	9	SOA, RS	-5%	RS - 1
	12	SFA	-10%	SFA - 1
	16	SOA	-5%	
No Change	4	SOA, RS	0	RS - 3
	7	SOA, RS	0	SOA - 3
	13	SOA, RS	0	

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Awareness (SFA), Social Awareness (SOA), Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), and Responsible Decision-Making (RDM).

After looking at directional changes, I also conducted a side-by-side analysis for prompt alignment and correspondence. With the survey designed to access two potential data points for each prompt, I looked at responses to like prompts. For example, prompts 1 and 5 both required

respondents to rate student application of responsible decision-making skills. Likewise, prompts 2 and 10 required respondents to consider student application of self-management skills. By comparing like prompts, I looked for alignment of responses for measurement calibration. In other words, did staff members respond similarly to aligned survey prompts? If so, what might this indicate? If not, what might be learned? Table 5 represents the side-by-side staff survey prompt alignment analysis including related SEL competencies measured, correspondence results, and possible implications for the action research study.

Table 5  
*Side-by-Side Staff Survey Prompt Alignment Analysis*

Prompt Alignment		SEL Competency	Direction of Change (+/-/no change)		Correspondence (yes/no)	Possible Implication
1	5	RDM	-6	-6	yes	negative change
2	10	SM	+6	+11	yes	improvement
3	8	RS, RDM	+13	+5	yes	improvement
4	13	SOA, RS	No change	No change	yes	no change
11	16	SOA	+11	-5	no	NA
6	15	RS, SM	+6	+29	yes	improvement
7	9	SOA, RS	no change	-5	no	NA
12	14	SFA	-10	+13	no	NA

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Awareness (SFA), Social Awareness (SOA), Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), and Responsible Decision-Making (RDM).

Side-by-side analysis showed potential correspondence in staff responses for 10 of the 16 prompts. Staff respondents rated students similarly for prompts 1 and 5, directed at responsible

decision-making skills. While there are several possible implications of these results, and the negative directional changes noted during the course of student program participation, initial considerations included reduced staff perception of student ability, diminished student ability, and inconsistent student application of responsible decision-making skills related to age or developmental stage.

For prompts 2 and 10, directed at student application of self-management skills, staff respondents rated students similarly. Likewise, staff respondents rated students similarly for prompts 3 and 8 (relationship skills and responsible decision-making) and prompts 6 and 15 (relationship skills and self-management). Possible implications of these results are that students improved in these SEL competencies during program participation. Staff respondents also rated students similarly for prompts 4 and 13, directed at social awareness and relationship skills in relation to frequency of sharing feelings with others. These results indicate that staff perceived no change in student application of these competencies during the course of their participation in the program. Comparing the other six prompts, respondents did not rate students similarly, possibly indicating a lack of prompt alignment or calibration.

### **End-of-Program Student Surveys**

In addition to end-of-program teacher surveys, students engaged in two end-of-program surveys. For Student Survey 1, students responded to prompts related to perception of their own knowledge and application of the five SEL competencies. For Student Survey 2, students again rated their opinion of the importance of each of the five competencies. Each survey was an exact replica of the pre-program survey and included Likert 3-point scales. For Survey 1, 1 indicated “always true,” 2 indicated “sometimes true,” and 3 indicated “rarely true.” For Survey 2, 1

indicated “very important,” 2 indicated “somewhat important,” and 3 indicated “not important at all.”

After collecting data from each survey, comparing prompts for positive and negative wording and flipping this data for greater accuracy in analysis, I compiled the data into spreadsheets, converted the data to delimited text files, and uploaded the data to RStudio (2020) in order to conduct simple descriptive statistics. I computed mean scores and compared student pre-program and end-of-program mean responses, the difference, average percentage difference, and percentage change for each response. I followed the same process as with the staff survey data, aligning assessed SEL competencies and noting directional change. Table 6 lists survey prompts, pre-program and end-of-program mean responses, calculated differences, average percentage change, related SEL competencies, and direction of change.

Table 6  
*Student Survey Prompts, Pre- and End-of-Program Mean Scores, Differences, SEL Competencies, and Direction of Change*

Prompt	Pre Mean	End Mean	Diff	Average % Change	SEL Competency	Direction of Change (+/-/no change)
1. I know when others are happy or sad.	2.625	2.625	0	0	SOA	No change
2. I can calm myself when I'm angry or upset.	1.625	2.125	0.5	31	SM	+
3. I know what I am good at.	2.625	2.625	0	0	SFA	No change
4. I share my feelings.	1.875	1.875	0	0	SOA, RS	No change
5. I think carefully before making decisions.	2	1.875	-0.125	-6	RDM	-
6. I ask for help when I have a problem.	1.875	1.875	0	0	RS, SM	No change
7. It's easy for me to listen and talk to others.	2.25	2	-0.25	-11	SOA, RS	-
8. I stand up for myself by saying and doing what I believe.	2.625	2.375	-0.25	-10	RS, RDM	-
9. I find it difficult to have conversations with others.	1.75	2.25	0.5	29	SOA, RS	+
10. It's hard to control myself when I'm upset or angry.	1.625	2	0.375	23	SM	+
11. I quickly make decisions and don't spend too much time thinking about them.	2.25	2.125	-0.125	-6	RDM	-
12. I'm not sure what I am good at.	2.25	2.5	0.25	11	SFA	+
13. I keep feelings to myself.	1.5	2.25	0.75	50	SOA, RS	+
14. I follow what my friends say to do.	2.125	2.125	0	0	RS, RDM	No change
15. I'd rather solve a problem on my own than ask for help.	1.625	2.125	0.5	31	RS, SM	+
16. It's hard to understand how other people feel.	2.375	2	-0.375	-16	SOA	-

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), Responsible Decision-Making (RDM), Social Awareness (SOA), and Self-Awareness (SFA).

To more critically examine this initial data, I utilized the same protocol as when I worked with the staff survey data. I noted percentage and directional changes for mean responses to each prompt. I observed positive directional changes for responses to prompts 2, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 15. These prompts corresponded to all five SEL competencies with the greatest average percentage change (50%) for prompt 13 directed at social awareness and relationship skills and the ability to share feelings with others. As for the number of times each competency showed positive movement in relation to a prompt, the most frequently reported were self-management and relationship skills.

In examination of other student reported changes, responses to prompts 5, 7, 8, 11, and 16 all moved in a negative direction with the greatest average percentage change (-16%) reported for social awareness and the ability to understand how others feel. For the number of times each competency showed negative movement in relation to a prompt, the most frequently highlighted corresponded to responsible decision-making. For prompts 1, 3, 4, 6, and 14 related to all five SEL competencies, I noted no changes. Table 7 shows the alignment of survey prompts by direction of change, related SEL competencies, percentage change, and a ranked summary listing reported number of changes.

Table 7  
*Student Survey Prompts Aligned by Direction of Change, Related SEL Competency, Average Percentage Change, and Ranked SEL Competency Summary*

Direction of Change	Prompt	Related SEL Competency	Average % Change	SEL Competency Results Summary (Ranked)
Positive Change	2	SM	31	SM - 3
	9	SOA, RS	29	RS - 3
	10	SM	23	SOA - 2
	12	SFA	11	SFA - 1
	13	SOA, RS	50	
	15	RS, SM	31	
Negative Change	5	RDM	-6	RDM - 3
	7	SOA, RS	-11	RS - 2
	8	RS, RDM	-10	SOA - 2
	11	RDM	-6	
	16	SOA	-16	
No Change	1	SOA	0	RS - 3
	3	SFA		SOA - 2
	4	SOA, RS		SM - 1
	6	RS, SM		RDM - 1
	14	RS, RDM		SFA - 1

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Awareness (SFA), Social Awareness (SOA), Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), and Responsible Decision-Making (RDM).

In a side-by-side prompt comparison I aligned related prompts with corresponding SEL competencies, looking for parities and disparities as well as possible implications. From the data presented, it appeared that only four of the 16 prompts yielded corresponding results. Responses



to prompts 2 and 10 represent possible improvement in student self-management skills.

Responses to prompts 5 and 11 indicate negative directional change for responsible decision-making. Table 8 represents side-by-side prompt alignments to SEL competencies, percentage direction of change, correspondence, and possible implications.

Table 8  
*Side-by-Side Student Survey Prompt Alignment Analysis*

Prompt Alignment		SEL Competency	Percentage Direction of Change (+/-/no change)		Correspondence (yes/no)	Possible Implication
1	16	SOA	No change	-16	no	NA
2	10	SM	+31	+23	yes	improvement
3	12	SFA	No change	+11	no	NA
4	13	SOA, RS	No change	+50	no	NA
5	11	RDM	-6	-6	yes	negative change
6	15	RS, SM	No change	+31	no	NA
7	9	SOA, RS	-11	+29	no	NA
8	14	RS, RDM	-10	No change	no	NA

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Awareness (SFA), Social Awareness (SOA), Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), and Responsible Decision-Making (RDM).

Finally, in looking at Student Survey 2, I again removed all identifying information and conducted simple descriptive statistics. By analyzing specific survey prompts, related SEL competencies, average percentage change, and direction of change, I noted movement in a positive direction for prompts 1, 4, and 7 corresponding to social awareness and relationship skills. I also noted movement in a negative direction for prompts 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8—relating to all

five of the competencies. Table 9 shows the mean pre-program and end-of-program scores for each of the eight prompts, differences, average percentage change, related SEL competencies, and directional changes.

Table 9  
*Student 8-item Survey Prompts, Mean Responses, Differences, Related SEL Competencies, and Direction of Change*

Survey Prompt	Pre Mean	End Mean	Diff	Average % Change	SEL Competency	Direction of change (+/-/no change)
1. How important is it to be able to understand how others feel?	2.5	2.56	.06	3	SOA	+
2. How important is it to be able to calm oneself when angry or upset?	2.75	2.72	-.03	-1	SM	-
3. How important is it to be able to know what you are good at?	2.38	2.30	-.08	-1	SFA	-
4. How important is it to be able to share your feelings with others?	2.38	2.42	.05	2	SOA, RS	+
5. How important is it to think carefully before making decisions?	2.63	2.58	.05	-2	RDM	-
6. How important is it to ask for help when you have a problem?	2.25	2.16	-.09	-4	RS, SM	-
7. How important is it to be able to listen and talk to others?	2.63	2.70	.07	3	SOA, RS	+
8. How important is it to be able to stand up for yourself by saying and doing what you believe?	2.88	2.86	-.02	-.5	RS, RDM	-

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), Responsible Decision-Making (RDM), Social Awareness (SOA), and Self-Awareness (SFA).

## Survey Data Comparisons

Considering staff and student survey data, I compared pre-program and end-of-program responses within each group—students and staff—and across groups as well. My intent was to answer a number of questions. For example, did student and staff data correspond? Did perceived changes indicated in student data match perceived changes indicated in staff data? Did those changes represent positive or negative directional movement? For which SEL competencies did both groups report positive change? For which competencies did both groups report negative change? Finally, looking at side-by-side comparison data, which results from corresponding prompts yielded noteworthy data? With these questions in mind, I compared staff survey data with student survey data and Student Survey 1 data with Student Survey 2 data.

**Staff-to-student survey comparison.** Through cross-comparison of student and staff survey data and a check for prompt correspondence, it appeared that both students and staff noted changes in a positive direction in the SEL competency of self-management and noted change in a negative direction in the SEL competency of responsible decision-making. By looking at responses to both staff and student survey prompts 2 and 10, regarding student ability to control or calm themselves when angry or upset, I noted movement in a positive direction for self-management. For student responses to prompts 5 and 11 and staff responses to prompts 1 and 5, regarding student ability to examine pros and cons and think carefully before making decisions, I noted movement in a negative direction for responsible decision-making. Table 10 is a consolidated representation of the corresponding prompts, related competencies, and possible implications as indicated in Tables 5 and 8.

Table 10

*Corresponding Student and Staff Prompts, Related SEL Competencies, and Possible Implications*

Prompt Wording	SEL Competency	Possible Implication
<p>Student Survey 1</p> <p>Prompt 2 - I can calm myself when angry or upset.</p> <p>Prompt 10 - It's hard to control myself when I'm upset or upset.</p> <p>Staff Survey</p> <p>Prompt 2 - This student can calm him/herself when angry or upset.</p> <p>Prompt 10 - This student has difficulty controlling him/herself when angry or upset.</p>	SM	improvement
<p>Student Survey 1</p> <p>Prompt 5 - I think carefully before making decisions.</p> <p>Prompt 11 - I quickly make decisions and don't spend too much time thinking about them.</p> <p>Staff Survey</p> <p>Prompt 1 - This student makes decisions without considering pros and cons.</p> <p>Prompt 5 - This student thinks carefully before making decisions.</p>	RDM	Negative change

Based on the information presented here, it is possible that student ability to apply self-management skills improved during program participation. Also indicated, however, is that student ability to make responsible decisions either did not improve or possibly diminished during program participation.

**Student-to-student survey comparison.** Finally, I compared Student Survey 1 responses to Student Survey 2 responses, looking at student perceptions of their own application of SEL competencies and opinions of their importance. Through this comparison I wanted to

determine whether students considered the skills valuable. It is possible that if they did not perceive value, they would see no need to apply these competencies in their lives. Results from pre-program and end-of-program surveys indicate movement in a negative direction in five of the eight areas—self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. They also indicate positive changes in social awareness and relationship skills. Table 11 displays the alignment of Student Surveys 1 and 2, related SEL competencies, and directional changes.

Table 11  
*Student Survey 1 and Student Survey 2 Prompt Alignment, Related SEL Competencies, and Direction of Change*

8-Item Survey	16-Item Survey Prompt Correspondence	SEL Competency	Direction of Change (+/-/no change)
1	1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16	SOA	+
2	2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15	SM	-
3	3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15	SFA	-
4	1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16	SOA, RS	+
5	4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15	RDM	-
6	2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15	RS, SM	-
7	1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16	SOA, RS	+
8	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15	RS, RDM	-

*Note.* SEL competencies are abbreviated as follows: Self-Awareness (SFA), Social Awareness (SOA), Self-Management (SM), Relationship Skills (RS), and Responsible Decision-Making (RDM).

It is interesting to note that while looking at alignment of the two survey types by SEL competency, results appear contradictory. For example, positive changes in relationship skills,

as indicated by responses to Student Survey 2, prompt 4, appear to be negated by negative changes for the same competency as indicated by responses to prompts 6 and 8. In addition, initial data from pre-program surveys show student opinion of the importance of these competencies to be high prior to starting the program but move in a slightly negative direction after program participation. In questioning this data, I further examine and discuss these observations in the limitations section of Chapter 6.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented adult and student focus group data, staff and student survey data, thoughts and ideas from my reflexive journal, and validation group and research associate questions and considerations. I included participant quotes from both adult and student focus groups, conducted side-by-side prompt comparisons and alignments of prompts, noted themes, and aligned them to the SEL competencies. Themes identified in both pre-program focus groups include participant input regarding CASEL's (2013) SAFE program features and the CDE's (2018a) Guiding Principle 4—relating to the need for family and community partnerships—self-management, self-awareness, and relationship skills. End-of-program focus group themes include self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and a need to focus on integrated and universal SEL instruction for program improvement.

In addition to focus group themes, I utilized pre-program and end-of-program survey data to run simple descriptive statistics. I critically examined data trends, changes in student and staff perception of knowledge and application of SEL skills and competencies, and areas of student growth as well as opportunities for improvement. Survey comparison data from both staff and student participants showed positive changes in self-management skills and negative changes in responsible decision-making.

After compiling focus group themes, survey data, and reflexive journal notes, the validation group, research associates and I evaluated validity of the findings and questioned preliminary conclusions in order to drive the action research process towards improvement of the OST SEL program. We also made preliminary connections between the data and elements of BPNT as the theoretical framework utilized in this study. Chapter 6 includes discussion of the findings including implications, action planning, and deeper analysis of the data in relation to the theoretical framework.



## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a discussion and interpretation of the findings including data themes and trends, and alignment of the findings to BPNT. The discussion also contains research highlights and tangential findings as well as my personal reflections as the lead researcher, insider to the research site, and insider in the nonprofit organization I studied. Finally, this chapter contains links to literature related to growth opportunities and recommendations for subsequent action research cycles, implications for future studies aligned with the research stance of program improvement, and potential limitations and issues beyond the scope of the study. In consideration of the findings and identified actions for program improvement, I identify lessons learned and outline next steps not only for the nonprofit organization highlighted here but for other community partners in their design and implementation of more effective OST SEL programs for elementary students.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Using action research as the methodology to guide the inquiry process towards improvement of the OST SEL program offered by a northern California-based nonprofit organization, I worked with the validation group and research associates to examine pre-program focus group themes and survey trends. In turn, we used these to make data-informed modifications to the winter 2020 program session. Upon completion of the student program, we again worked with end-of-program focus group themes and survey data trends to evaluate effectiveness of the implemented modifications and plan for future action research cycles focused on continuous program improvement.

### **Pre-Program Data: Growth Opportunities and Program Modifications**

Through alignment of pre-program adult and student focus group themes with staff and student survey data trends, the validation group, research associates, and I narrowed the scope of our program modification efforts for the winter 2020 phase of the research cycle. Pre-program findings pointed to essential focus areas and SEL growth opportunities for self-awareness and self-management. In addition, in relation to CASEL's (2013) SAFE features of SEL program effectiveness and the CDE's (2018a) Guiding Principles, we identified growth opportunities related to instruction being active, focused, and explicit as well as an enhanced focus on family and community partnerships. Directing our efforts towards these specific growth opportunities allowed us to make manageable modifications in the short time between pre-program data collection and the program start date.

During this one-week time period, the validation group and I worked with the nonprofit's educational design team to make minor revisions to the essential focus areas of self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and the active learning component of the SAFE program features. We based these revision decisions on the research team's opinion that the program's current curriculum included sufficient focus on these SEL competencies as well as a balance of instructional practices representing both passive and active learning. Revisions included changes to paper-and-pencil lessons, introduction of new mindfulness activities, and learning opportunities focused on identification of various levels of emotion.

With these minor revisions addressed, the majority of the team's efforts went toward implementing changes to the parent component of the OST SEL program in order to emphasize the focused and explicit SAFE program features and Guiding Principle 4: Family and Community Partnerships (CASEL, 2013; CDE, 2018a). Adult focus group participants

expressed a desire that parent/guardians of participating students be more informed about the instruction offered. In this way, they might further support their children at home. To accommodate this request, the validation group, nonprofit organization's educational design team, and I considered previous ideas about building our communication loop through emails and social media posts.

However, we decided to make more major modifications by designing and implementing a parent/guardian workshop series. Workshops ran during the last 30 minutes of each weekly student session and included opportunities for parent/guardians to interact with program facilitators, learn SEL-related content, share ideas with other parent/guardians, and create an SEL take-home tool to complement student learning for that day. Take-home tools included a feelings chart for participants to identify weak, moderate, and strong emotions, an empathy mulligan jar for participants to collect examples of actions taken to restore relationships, and a decision-making wheel for weighing pros and cons. Table 12 represents the pre-program essential focus areas, growth opportunities for each, suggested program modifications, and specific actions for implementation.

Table 12  
*Pre-program essential focus areas, growth opportunities, program modifications, and actions for implementation*

Essential Focus Area	Growth Opportunity	Program Modifications	Actions
Relationship Skills	Relationship Skills: Establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships	Teach students to engage with diverse groups of individuals—including adults and peers—in both positive and negative settings.	Students identify verbal and nonverbal communication, practice speaking and listening, and role-play prosocial, cooperative behavior.
Self-Awareness	Recognize how emotions, thoughts, and values influence behavior.	Teach students to recognize strengths.	Students identify a skill they could teach others. Once identified, students take turns teaching skills to partners.
	Reflect on one's self and one's actions.	Teach students to identify different levels of emotions.	Students use a feelings wheel to identify weak, moderate, and strong levels of emotion.
Self-Management	Regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors; express emotions; calm one's self when angry or upset.	Teach students how to express identified emotions and seek support.	After identification of weak, moderate, and strong emotions students reflect and discuss which emotions they have shared and which they have kept to themselves. Students identify trusted adults with whom they can express themselves and seek support.
		Teach a variety of mindfulness strategies to develop a mindfulness toolkit for self-management.	Students learn mindful melt, balloon arms, and shake-it-off strategies.
SAFE program features aligned to CDE Social and Emotional Learning Guiding Principle 4 (CASEL, 2013; CDE, 2018a)	Develop and deliver active, focused, and explicit SEL instruction to students and families for student internalization and more frequent application of SEL competencies across a variety of settings.	Add curricular components to address focused and explicit instructional strategies, and provide supplemental parent/guardian support for integration of family and student SEL.	Invite parent/guardians to attend workshops offered concurrent to the student program. Workshops include SEL instruction, opportunities for communication with program facilitators, and make-and-take SEL tools.
		Adapt paper-and-pencil activities to provide for increased physical activity to address active SAFE feature.	Modify decision-wheel and bullying activities to be interactive physical activities.

**End-of-Program Data: Highlights**

During the four-week OST SEL session, program facilitators and I implemented both minor and major modifications identified from pre-program focus group themes and survey data trends. We reflected on these modifications, informal feedback from both students and adults, and noted ideas for additional revisions and modifications. We then combined these reflections with the end-of-program focus group and survey data to celebrate highlights regarding the impact of these changes, and to make plans for the next program iteration. As a highlight of the potential impact of our work we identified positive changes in student self-management skills.

**Data trends.** Both adult and student survey responses highlighted positive changes in student self-management skills. Comparing pre-program and end-of-program data, the validation group, research associates, and I highlighted a positive average percentage change of 31% for student responses and 29% for staff responses. Focus group comments and vignettes supported these changes. Table 13 includes end-of-program focus group participant comments related to self-management data highlights.

Table 13

*End-of-Program Adult and Student Focus Group Comments Related to Self-Management*

Adult Focus Group: Self-Management Highlights
<p>Participant comment regarding program strengths:</p> <p>“I wish I had the program for [my daughter] because I grappled with that [self-management] when she was in third and fourth grade. Just full on meltdowns.”</p> <p>Participant comment regarding student learning:</p> <p>“But [my son] needed to be taught. Breathe. Reflect. Think about it. Is it worth getting upset? What are you getting upset over? What is the feeling you're having? Identify the emotion.”</p> <p>Participant comment regarding student growth:</p> <p>“This student had super anxiety, right?...I've never seen this kid ever act like silly and goofy like a kid should. Now I see him walking across the quad and [he's dancing and being goofy]...it was like the coolest thing. This kid would have never done something like that. And so, I meant to tell you [program facilitator]...nice job. It's ok not to be perfect.”</p> <p>Participant comment regarding student change:</p> <p>“[This] student who was a bully...I had a teacher come to me and say, ‘oh, my gosh, is so-and-so? Did they leave our school...I haven't heard anything this year about so-and-so.’ Well, I was like, [this person]...flipped and turned the leaf or whatever. Like way better.”</p>
Student Focus Group: Self-Management Highlights
<p>Participant comment regarding perceived growth:</p> <p>“I got more kinder.”</p> <p>Participant comments regarding thoughts and actions:</p> <p>“I think about things differently.”</p> <p>“I know how to take a re-do.”</p>

**Family vignette.** In addition to comments gathered from focus group participants, I captured a particularly poignant vignette from a parent of a participating student. This adult focus group participant sought me out while I set up for the student focus group and admitted to

being intentionally quiet during the meeting on the previous day; she had not seen any changes in her child and felt she had nothing to contribute to the conversation. That same night, however, a situation arose that proved to her otherwise. Through this key experience, or epiphanic event, as described by Stringer (2014), this mother told the story of her child's social-emotional growth and its power not only for him, but the family as a whole. I considered this unsolicited information to be a powerful example of program impact.

According to this mother of two, she had grown very upset when her younger son had not cleaned his room. She had admittedly yelled, taken away privileges, and the entire family was upset. Her older son, a program and research study participant, responded in a way in which he had never done before. He demonstrated empathy towards his brother, engaged his mother in a conversation asking her to reconsider the consequence for his younger brother because of the negative impact it would have, and asked that the entire family sit down together and talk about what was going on.

The mother reported that this type of response, the ensuing conversation, and the resulting actions that allowed them to work together had never occurred before. In fact, her son went so far as to share how much he appreciates his mother and admitted that he often does not make things easy for her. His empathy drove their conversation and the boys' actions to "take a re-do" and clean their rooms over the weekend. The mother cried and thanked me and shared that the boys have now requested more frequent conversations like the one they had so that the entire family can communicate how they feel and what they need.

I did not know, however, if this parent's perspective of the situation would match the student's. Not wanting to bias the student involved by probing specifically about the events of the previous night, I proceeded to run the student focus group according to protocol. I inquired about each of the five SEL competencies taught, student experiences with the program, and asked focus group participants to share one thing each had recently done to apply their SEL skills. It was at this point that the young boy from the mother's story shared the same experience from his perspective. Based on the transcribed and authenticated recording, he shared the following:

Last night my brother got in trouble for hiding under his bed [when he didn't clean his room]. And I got into the situation, because when my mom tells me to put my clothes

away I whine sometimes. And I had a big talk with my mom and I said, sorry...and I was going to fix my room. I told my mom I was going to fix my room on Saturday.

When I asked this student how his actions had been different than usual, he shared:

Understanding what she [mom] was feeling because it was really hard for her to do the clothes, fold them. Sometimes I would forget how hard it...how much work she's doing and I would just throw my clothes inside my dresser, just mess it up. Sometimes I just forget how much work she's done.

Finally, when I asked how he felt after the event, the student participant shared that he felt good to have understood, helped, and communicated with his family, and that he wanted to have more positive communication like this in the future. This example illustrates his growing competence in all five SEL skills and aligns with literature that highlights the interdependence of social, emotional, and cognitive development and resulting behavioral outcomes (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

**Reflexive journal notes.** Throughout the study I also maintained a reflexive journal. I noted summaries of conversations with other program facilitators, their comments and ideas for program improvement, and my own research and program celebrations and challenges. After the first two student sessions, for example, I noted the following:

Current program pros are student engagement, active participation from approximately half of the families, and the collegial spirit in which my co-facilitators worked with students.

As for theoretical connections, I see the participants understanding and practicing self-awareness and self-management. We need to maintain this focus on self-awareness and also on relationship skills so that students see when they need to self-regulate and how their actions impact others. These concepts relate to SDT and BPNT and the elements of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

In review of the data and focus group participant comments, family vignette, and my reflexive journal notes, the action research team and I found connections to the literature and cause for celebration of the program's impact; SDT research suggests that psychologically



supportive social contexts and instruction contribute to development of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, resulting in improved well-being (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

### **End-of-Program Data: Growth Opportunities**

Having celebrated highlights from the research findings, the validation group, research associates, and I proceeded to also examine potential growth opportunities that emerged during data analysis. We noted the need to continue building all five SEL competencies, with a special focus on responsible decision-making. In addition, we identified a growth opportunity related to the provision of integrated and universal SEL instruction and supports not only in the school setting but extending to families and the greater community.

**Data trends.** After conducting side-by-side prompt alignment and looking at staff-to-student survey data comparisons for all five SEL competencies, the action research team and I noted correspondence and a negative change in student application of responsible decision-making skills. In fact, for the two staff survey prompts and the two corresponding student survey prompts soliciting feedback regarding this skill, the average percentage change was -6%. While instruction in this SEL competency is an explicit and focused part of the OST SEL program curriculum, survey responses all indicated a backslide in this area.

Considering these data, the validation group and I questioned this negative directional movement, the possible rationale, and research-related implications. Was the apparent backslide due to specific experiences in which staff perceived student failure to demonstrate responsible decision-making capabilities? Had student ability to apply these skills actually diminished or were skill application inconsistencies due to age, maturity, or brain development? With these questions as a guide, I reviewed the literature to learn more about how to support students in learning and applying responsible decision-making skills. Findings from this review align with

the need to braid SEL instruction of all five competencies for more coordinated brain development and improved executive functioning (Goleman, 1995; Mahapatra, 2016; Naglieri & Das, 1990).

**Themes.** In addition to the growth opportunity in the area of responsible decision-making, adult focus group themes centered on the idea of providing integrated and universal SEL instruction—and program modifications to support these efforts. From the beginning of the study, pre-program adult focus group participants shared their need to learn more, build practice, and bring all stakeholders into the SEL conversation. Building on this initial theme, these same adult participants continued to advocate for integrated and universal SEL during the end-of-program focus group meeting. By pushing for integration of schoolwide, OST, family, and community wellness efforts, adult focus group participants referenced the need to develop a wellness mindset that becomes part of the culture or atmosphere beyond the school setting and into the community.

In reference to universality, one participant shared, “When you think about where you live, you want to say, oh, well, I’m supported by people who are making good choices.” Another added to this sentiment remarking, “We need to make it so that it is a community... everybody’s a team.” Finally, a third participant shared his perspective, “Everybody needs resources. Everybody needs community, and everybody needs people, you know?” These comments pointed in a clear direction for program modifications aimed at universal SEL instruction, resources, and practices. They were also consistent with literature highlighting the need for teachers, schools, families, and communities to partner in providing continuous and consistent opportunities for students to build and practice skills for more positive social, emotional, and

academic outcomes (CASEL, 2020b; CDE, 2018a; Jones, Brush et al., 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2017).

In further analysis of the themes and related literature, the action research team and I questioned the program modifications we made based on findings from pre-program focus groups and surveys. We examined these programmatic changes in relation to the SAFE features of explicit and focused instruction and CDE Guiding Principle 4, Family and Community Partnerships. Did our actions result in greater program effectiveness?

Reviewing both adult and student focus group themes and staff and student survey data, neither indicated changes—in a positive or negative direction. These data proved unhelpful as we engaged in the reflective step of the action research cycle. We realized the need to conduct further investigation, adding information from other stakeholders and data sources to clarify and extend our understanding of the results. We again engaged in questioning. What might we learn from adding parent perspectives to those of students and teachers in analysis of the data? As Stringer (2014) suggested, such “holistic analysis...incorporates all factors likely to have an impact on achieving an effective solution to the problem investigated” (p. 147). In order to move forward in planning, we needed more data.

While not a formal part of the action research study, I sent an anonymous Google survey to parent/guardians of student program participants asking for feedback on the implemented workshops. Of the eight families involved in the study, only one parent/guardian responded. This single response indicated appreciation for the parent/guardian workshops and the focus on SEL instruction but a perceived lack of value in the take-home tools provided. In addition, this respondent suggested conducting the program in the evening to accommodate childcare challenges.

While this informal data represented the voice of only one parent/guardian, it inspired additional questions for the team to consider in future iterations. While literature suggests the need for direct inputs in the form of parental involvement in development of the whole child, what role should families take in OST SEL program instruction (Miyamoto, 2016; Oberle et al., 2016)? What program changes might result in increased family engagement?

**Reflexive journal notes.** These research highlights and growth opportunities, insights, and questions—combined with the notes I kept in my reflexive journal—provided valuable direction in planning for program improvement. While some questions appeared to be research-dependent, others were logistical in nature. For example, after the second session of the student program, I noted the following concern about program effectiveness:

Today was the second day of [the program]. The curriculum seemed to flow nicely, though we were off schedule a few times. I think we still don't have the time sequence down for starting the program. Right after school was too hectic, but 10 minutes later seems too late. What might be the ramifications of not completing each day's planned lessons and activities?

Also of concern, program facilitators and I noted high energy levels among the student participants. These led to instructional challenges and questions regarding the active component of CASEL's (2013) SAFE features. Effective SEL programs allow students to actively practice and master new skills through real-time, everyday applications and routines (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010; Jones, Brush et al., 2017). In my reflexive journal, I considered the following:

The big challenge today was the high energy of the participants. Was it due to their familiarity with each other, the possible sugar intake they had due to the Valentine's Day holiday, or something about the curriculum? The other facilitators and I debriefed and discussed the need for an active brain-break midway through the 2-hour session. We also considered modifications we might make to future lessons to increase the level of activity. At the same time, in looking at the active SAFE program feature, were the activities we provided congruent with the real-time instruction and application practice opportunities advocated by CASEL?

In terms of student SEL growth, I recorded thoughts about student conversations related to expressing their feelings as well as their concerns about sharing with others:

I noticed that several students reported not sharing their feelings with others, and difficulty managing emotions when angry or upset. Yesterday's session focused on self-awareness, recognizing emotions, and the need to share with a trusted individual. I wonder about SEL skill application as a developmental construct. Perhaps we will need to revisit these concepts and look to the literature to provide some insight.

Reflexive journal notes were consistent with the literature; certain basic social, emotional, and cognitive competencies are foundational to the development of more complex skills (Jones & Kahn, 2017). It is possible that a lack of fundamental skills contributed to the challenges students faced. I also made notes about other aspects of the study that I had not captured in focus group or survey data but appeared to be tangential highlights of the work:

Several of the adult focus group participants have come to me independently to express their pleasure at being involved in the research study. They described it as a true partnership between the school, families, and the community. Parent participants appreciate the opportunity to hear what teachers are doing, and teacher participants like to dialogue and brainstorm about changes they could make to their instructional practices as they partner more closely with those outside of the classroom. One participant even likened the adult focus group to a support group during which there is the opportunity to share, learn, and grow to better meet student SEL needs.

Finally, I made notes about the potential impact of some of the modifications we had made. If the nonprofit organization planned to scale and grow in the coming years, were the modifications we made replicable and sustainable?

The executive director continues to ask if what we are doing is replicable and sustainable. We have implemented a lot of new activities—including the take-home tool in the parent workshops—that require additional funding for supplies. I am also using more personnel to run the student program and lead the concurrent parent workshops. These individuals require professional development and SEL skills themselves, opportunities for reflection, and adequate pay. When we iterate, we are going to have to look critically at these necessities.

In terms of personnel, research on effective OST programs aligned to my reflexive journal notes; we need to provide ongoing professional development, collaborative planning and reflection opportunities, and mental health supports and resources for our program facilitators (Durlak et al., 2010; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Reflecting upon these insights, I recognized the need to more critically analyze data highlights and growth opportunities in relation to SDT and BPNT. This analysis would guide planning for future iterations of the action research cycle to support continuous program improvement.

### **Self-Determination and Basic Psychological Needs Theories**

SDT posits that when specific psychological and social needs are satisfied within the context of one's culture and development, individuals experience growth, integrity, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence must be supported developmentally in infants and young children and are “essential to adaptation and thriving” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 84). In alignment to the five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017), the satisfaction of one's basic psychological needs allows for the development of attachments and social bonds, and integration of social and self-regulation skills that contribute to wellness over an individual's lifetime (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Contrary to needs satisfaction, however, needs thwarting can result in developmental and social dysfunction (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Rather than experiencing well-being, individuals experience ill-being. Based on the literature surrounding ACEs and the long-term negative psychological, physiological, social, and behavioral outcomes, evidence of needs thwarting is prevalent. In fact, when basic psychological needs are thwarted or frustrated, individuals show “motivational, cognitive, affective, and other psychological decrements...such as lowered vitality, loss of volition, greater fragmentation, and diminished well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2017,

p. 86). In other words, general needs support—like instruction offered through SEL programs implemented both within and outside of the traditional school day—may predict vitality and well-being.

Looking specifically at needs support as it relates to the development of autonomy, relatedness, and competence and the findings of this action research study, a review of each definition is required. Simply stated, competence relates to one's perception of ownership of activities in which they feel successful and effective. Relatedness refers to one's need for belonging, significance, and connectedness to others. Finally, autonomy refers to one's need for independence, self-regulation, and self-initiation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While these needs appear to be independent of each other, well-being depends on the integration of all three.

### **SDT and Research Highlights**

Closely aligned to the concept of autonomy, self-management, as defined by CASEL (2017), includes the ability to regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in various situations: including stress management, impulse-control, self-motivation and goal-setting. Based on this study's findings, student self-management skills improved during the course of program participation. With program instruction and practice in self-management revolving around self-reflection and mindfulness skills, I looked to the literature in support of the possibility that these practices contributed to improvement. Specifically examining the practice of mindfulness, I confirmed that such activities encourage individuals to attend to current internal and external experiences and, through this focus, are more likely to experience autonomy and integrated self-regulation and less likely to engage in automatic or non-regulated behaviors. In fact, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), mindfulness allows for deep processing and prevention of reactivity, both necessary for self-management.

In addition to improvement in self-management and its relationship to development of autonomy, I identified other highlights associated with the SDT and BPNT elements of competence and relatedness. While not addressed as essential focus areas for modification, participation in the study appeared to be a highlight for both student and adult focus group participants. For example, when student focus group participants shared their feelings regarding action research participation and solicitation of their voice in the process, one responded, “It feels good. I don’t know how to explain it but it feels good.” Another stated, “Yes, same. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s a good thing though.”

Considering my insider positionality in the program and research study, I questioned these responses, making notes in my reflexive journal. Were these student sentiments honest? Had participants simply provided information they felt I desired or expected? Using these notes, I reviewed focus group protocols and the specific reminders I provided students about requirements for honest and open feedback directed at program improvement. I shared my notes with the validation group and research associates, working collaboratively to analyze the data. We concluded that student comments demonstrated the likelihood of their experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and that these contributed not only to program impact and actions taken during the research study, but to student well-being. This finding aligns with my original hypothesis that action research might serve as both methodology and tool for program improvement leading to enhanced well-being in research participants.

It is possible that this finding also applies to the tangential highlight I identified regarding adult focus group participation and experiences in the study. These participants shared appreciation of the opportunity to communicate with others who represented staff, parents, and community members from outside the school setting. They also referenced their new, broader



perspectives of student and family wellness needs, and their thinking about how to creatively support one another in integrating SEL throughout the school and community. One parent participant commented, “As a parent, it helps me...to hear what teachers have to say...you know, just to hear what they’re dealing with.” Other parent participants referred to the power of partnership with teachers and found the focus group to be an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about SEL practices implemented at the site. These comments point to BPNT, adult focus group participant feelings of relatedness, and their developing SEL competence.

### **SDT and Research Growth Opportunities**

With respect to growth opportunities, student development of responsible decision-making and the need for integrated and universal SEL in classrooms, schools, families, and the larger community also align to SDT and BPNT and the elements of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. While growth opportunities in the area of responsible decision-making emphasize individual SEL supports, the need for integrated and universal SEL has a broader focus. Therefore, in planning program modifications to best serve individuals and groups in development of their basic psychological needs in the next research cycle, the action research team and I needed to incorporate more diverse data into the emerging analysis. This more holistic analysis included not only data collected from primary and secondary stakeholders, but also records and documents, and research evidence (Stringer, 2014).

**Responsible decision-making.** Support for development of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness closely aligns to the SEL competency of responsible decision-making. Though according to Daniel Goleman (1995) and his theory of emotional intelligence, connected circuitry between the brain’s amygdala and neocortex might justify the possibility that responsible decision-making should not be taught in isolation, but in

coordination with the other four competencies defined by CASEL (2017); self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. This idea of coordinated SEL instruction, combined with research related to child and adolescent development of planning and decision-making skills, provides guidance for future program modifications directed at more targeted and developmentally appropriate instruction not only focused on responsible decision-making, but on all five competencies.

Goleman's (1995) concept of emotional skill integration not only helps to explain some of the data I collected in this study, but also provides guidance for program modifications directed at "harmonizing emotion and thought" (p. 27). In student focus groups, for example, participants spoke of their fear of expressing themselves due to potential consequences of embarrassment or punishment. Their decision-making capabilities appeared to be negatively influenced by self-awareness of emotion levels, social awareness of what others might think of them, self-management of somatic symptoms, and relationship skills with regard to the impact of their decisions on interactions with others. Coordinated instruction and practice of all five SEL competencies, however, supports sound decision-making skills. According to Goleman (1995), when individuals are attuned to their feelings, have attentional control to remember past experiences, can self-regulate somatic symptoms, and interact in positive ways with others, they more successfully weigh pros and cons in planning for a course of action.

To further support the need for integration of emotional skills in planning and decision-making, the planning, attention, simultaneous and successive (PASS) theory of intelligence identifies four interrelated cognitive processes—each appearing to closely align to one or more of the five SEL competencies (Naglieri & Das, 1990). The first of these processes relates to executive functioning and includes the ability to control one's behavior, set goals, and monitor

performance. The second relates to attention and one's ability to focus on relevant information and tune out irrelevant information. The third aligns with information processing and the ability to translate, integrate, and retain information. Finally, the fourth process links to the ability to simultaneously and successfully integrate and sequence information.

Examining the development of these processes in students in grades three, five, and seven, Mahapatra (2016) found planning and decision-making capabilities to be a function of age and grade-related learning and emotional experiences. According to these findings, children exhibit changes in planning and decision-making between the ages of three and 12 years, first demonstrating increases in perceptual and memory levels and then proceeding to more complex conceptual planning abilities as they approach the age of 15 (Mahapatra, 2016; Mann et al., 1989). These researchers suggest that prior to age 12, students may not be capable of the more complex conceptual planning that takes into account past learning and emotional experiences, and what is required for goal-setting or evaluation of one's actions relevant to goal attainment. They also suggest that development of decision-making competence may be related to attitudinal constraints, values and beliefs, peer pressure, and even breakdowns in family structure (Dreher & Oerter, 1987; Mahapatra 2016; Mann et al., 1989).

In consideration of the literature and the growth opportunity related to development of responsible decision-making in student participants, the next action research iteration will include integration of the five SEL competencies along with developmentally appropriate instruction in planning and decision-making. The current program curriculum, delivered in a series of modules each focused on one or two SEL competencies, will include modifications for simultaneous instruction and practice of all five. At the same time, instruction in decision-making will start with a focus on developing perceptual and memory skills related to past

learning and emotional experiences and build to include higher-level conceptual planning and evaluation tasks. The intent is that these modifications will result in student decision-making competence.

**Integrated and universal SEL instruction.** In addition to development of responsible decision-making in student participants, findings from the current study point to the need for integrated and universal SEL instruction and supports in schools, families, and communities. This growth opportunity closely aligns with research and practice related to development of SEL competencies and to the questions posed by the action research team during data analysis: How might we develop universal platforms for building SEL competencies? What might be the role of the OST SEL program in developing such a platform? Looking to the literature, I identified numerous studies underscoring the importance of parent involvement in the development of these competencies and calls to action from state and other youth-serving organizations that include recommendations for providing integrated and universal supports for development of SEL competencies. A review of these recommendations provides guidance for future action research iterations directed at program improvement of the OST SEL program reviewed here.

In order to promote improved student outcomes, researchers and youth-serving organizations advocate for integrated student supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement (Stoewen, 2017; Wasser Gish, 2019). These supports aim to address the negative academic, physiological, psychological, and socioeconomic impacts of ACEs and provide for resource-coordination to better meet student needs. Comprehensive services not only include those found within the school setting but outside through intentional collaboration with families and community partners. These collaborative efforts may result in improved attendance,

higher academic achievement, reduced dropout rates, and better social and emotional outcomes for students involved (Moore et al., 2017).

Over the past several years, research findings supported the concept of coordinated SEL activities and policies delivered across environmental contexts including classrooms, schools, families, and communities. In classrooms, this includes implementation of SEL across the curriculum, and state and federal policies that impact teacher training. In schools, this involves practices and procedures that span academic, personal, and social domains—including PBIS, MTSS, and other structures that provide for student learning and application of values and expectations related to positive school culture. And, in families and communities, SEL coordination includes direct inputs such as parental involvement in child-rearing, definitions of values, and civic and cultural activities that influence social goals and acceptable behaviors and practices (Miyamoto, 2016; Oberle et al., 2016). These learning contexts provide for constant interaction and reinforcement of critical SEL skills and competencies.

In addition, state and other youth-serving organizations—including the CDE, CASEL, and The Aspen Institute—all call for integrated and universal SEL supports. CDE (2018a) Guiding Principle 4 focuses on family and community partnerships and calls for leveraged resources from the entire school community. This includes engagement by expanded learning and OST providers, families, early learning and care programs, and community-based organizations (CDE, 2018a).

At the same time, CASEL's (2020) Focus Area 3 emphasizes a systemic SEL approach based on research that suggests SEL is more effective when extended beyond the classroom to include school, family, and community partnerships. Resources for collaboration and partnership include definitions, toolkits, rubrics, and guides for identifying partners, building

communication loops, and evaluating SEL programs. In essence, the guide serves as a one-stop-shop for building and maintaining effective SEL partnerships.

Also calling for the promotion of widespread change, The Aspen Institute's (2017) report challenges local communities to shape and drive the process of comprehensively supporting students. Educators, families, civic leaders, and OST providers must collaborate to translate research into practice, innovate, and plan to support the whole student. This call to action also includes development of a shared vision, expertise, instructional changes, alignment and leveraging of resources, and development of stronger connections between schools, families, and community leaders. Based on this information, it is essential that future action research cycles focus on building an integrated and universal platform for SEL instruction and resources.

### **Recommendations for Program Improvement**

In consideration of all research highlights, growth opportunities, and a review of the literature, I worked with the action research team to develop several recommendations for modifications and program improvements to be made in subsequent action research cycles. While continuing to celebrate student growth in self-management, we plan to build upon our current instructional design and practices associated with all five SEL skills, while making curricular modifications to intentionally focus on their integration with responsible decision-making. Modification plans will also include developmental considerations as they relate to planning and decision-making, as well as the design and integration of universal SEL practices in classrooms, schools, families, and the larger community. Table 14 represents the essential focus areas, growth opportunities, suggested program modifications, and preliminary ideas for action and implementation in the next iteration of the action research cycle.

Table 14  
*End-of-Program Essential Focus Areas, Growth Opportunities, Suggested Program Modifications and Preliminary Ideas for Action*

Essential Focus Area	Growth Opportunity	Program Modifications	Preliminary Ideas for Action
Responsible Decision-Making	Build student knowledge, understanding, and practice of all five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2017) in order to provide support for development of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.	Integrate responsible decision-making instruction and practice throughout the program and explicitly link planning and decision-making with each of the other four competencies—self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. Consider developmentally appropriate planning and decision-making instruction and practice.	Rewrite program curriculum to integrate all five SEL competencies simultaneously. Instruction will include developmentally appropriate lessons and practice in planning and decision-making relevant to student age, learning, and emotional experience.
Integrated and Universal SEL	Develop an integrated and universal system for SEL by targeting barriers and coordinating community resources for improved societal outcomes (Stoewen, 2017; Wasser Gish, 2019)	Develop an SEL instructional program for educators and parent/guardians.	Design and implement wellness communities of practice for educators, and parent/guardians in schools that partner with the nonprofit organization. Integrate and leverage school-site, district, family, and community resources.
		Develop an SEL instructional program and engagement activities for community members.	Collaborate with other community partners, including district, nonprofit, medical, service organizations, and families to form a city wellness task force for community wellness programs, instruction, and resources.

I am eager to work with the nonprofit organization's educational design team and continue to call upon student and family voices as we detail out and begin working on our preliminary ideas for action. Looking at our growth opportunities in the areas of responsible decision-making and universal SEL, we plan to fully embrace our work. In fact, the team has already begun investigating research and evidence-based practices that build student cognitive processes as highlighted in the PASS theory (Naglieri & Das, 1990), and making curricular modifications to integrate responsible decision-making with instruction and practice in the other four SEL competencies. We are excited to engage students in instruction and real-time application of planning and decision-making that includes role-playing, adult scaffolding, and opportunities to learn from mistakes while confronting challenging situations.

We are also anxious to partner with teachers, staff, administrators, families, and the larger community to make SEL instruction and resources universal. As one of the adult focus group participants so aptly remarked, "We need to make it so that it is a community...everybody's a team." Our preliminary ideas for action include the establishment of wellness communities of practice and a city wellness task force. While the first community of practice for educators is on hold due to COVID-19 district closures, the city task force has already begun to meet and is in the process of creating public service announcements that will include social media posts developed by city residents—students and adults—for city residents. These next informal iterations of the action research process are creating a great deal of excitement within the nonprofit organization, and amongst the educational and city stakeholders with whom we have partnered, as we advance our cause—wellness for all.



### **Limitations and Issues Beyond the Scope of the Study**

It is important to note that with any research, limitations and other issues may arise that extend beyond the scope of the study, potentially impacting findings. These include anticipated challenges due to participant attrition or scheduling conflicts, as well as unanticipated factors such as changes in access to the research setting and participants. While neither attrition or scheduling conflicts were factors in this study, I identified and detailed below several limitations that must be considered in relation to the research findings.

The first two limitations relate to the small student participant sample size and the voluntary nature of the program. The OST SEL program has an enrollment capacity of 15 third through fifth grade student participants. During the action research cycle, students enrolled in 14 of the 15 slots. While this enrollment figure proved promising in terms of program participation, I received minor consent, staff consent, and child assent forms from eight of the program participants. This provided a limited set of student and staff survey data. In addition, due to the voluntary nature of the program, several students missed portions of instruction due to tardiness or left early due to illness. Two students arrived late to the first session, and two others departed early from subsequent sessions. It is possible that these students experienced curricular gaps.

Also limited were the number of student participants who attended both focus groups. While the pre-program student focus group included six students who either attended the OST SEL program in the past or enrolled in the winter 2020 session, the end-of-program focus group included only two participants. Lower attendance may be due to the multi-track year-round school calendar and the fact that four of the original six participants went off track the day prior. Regardless of reminders sent earlier in the week, these other four participants did not attend.

Despite this lower attendance, the two participants who did attend provided timely and helpful perspectives and feedback to inform the action research study.

The fourth and fifth limitations relate to generalizability of the study's findings and inclusion of more diverse populations. The data, discussion, and conclusions are specific to the research site and may not be replicable in other settings due to differences in demographics, school schedules, and student SEL needs. In addition, because the nonprofit organization's OST SEL curriculum is currently offered in English, in lieu of translations only English-speaking participants participated. It is my recommendation that additional research cycles focus on elementary school research sites in more diverse communities—socioeconomically, linguistically, and culturally. In addition, I recommend implementing the OST SEL program and an iteration of action research at a school-site that operates on a traditional school calendar.

An additional limitation of the study and its findings relates to student improvement of self-management skills and PBIS implementation at the research site. The site first adopted PBIS eight years ago, and continuously works to develop systems and structures to build a positive school culture. Schoolwide expectations encourage students to be safe, kind, accountable, respectful, and make good choices. While direct instruction in self-management skills is not an element of PBIS, it is possible that the overall emphasis on positive behavior might play a role in student improvement.

In terms of limitations regarding my insider positionality, prior to conducting the research study I recognized the potential challenge of remaining neutral. To combat this challenge, I worked to triangulate the data and engaged others for their perspectives throughout the research process. I maintained a reflexive journal, engaged with focus group participants in bracketing

assumptions, met with the validation group to analyze and question data trends, and engaged research associates in critically analyzing the data.

Also related to my insider positionality, a possible limitation existed in the relationships I had with both adult and student focus group participants. Not only did I act in the role of lead researcher, but I co-facilitated the OST SEL program, previously taught at the research site, and maintained acquaintances with focus group participants. While it is possible that focus group participants feared judgement, or wanted to represent themselves favorably, I constantly reminded them of the research focus on program improvement. Their responses would serve a larger goal of bringing wellness to more students and families.

With regard to possible limitations of the survey measurement tools, Student Survey 2 yielded minimal data to inform the action research cycle. This survey, designed to solicit student opinion of the importance of the five SEL competencies, showed not only contradictory findings when compared to the other survey measures, but also minimal directional movement between collection of pre-program and end-of-program responses. In taking this data to the validation group and research associate teams, we discussed the possible rationale for these results. The action research team and I hypothesized that pre-program and end-of-program survey responses may not have changed much due to the fact that student ranking of SEL skill importance was high prior to program participation. In addition, it is possible that the slight negative directional movement could be due to students continuing to build knowledge in these areas and not yet having achieved mastery. Finally, in terms of result contradictions, it is possible that the measurement tool failed to adequately correspond to the other tools compared.

Also in reference to the measurement tools, it is possible that survey prompts for both the staff survey and Student Survey 1 failed to align or that participants misunderstood prompt

wording. While I piloted each of the surveys and looked closely at prompt correspondence prior to the study—for those worded both positively and negatively in relation to the five SEL competencies—side-by-side prompt alignment analysis showed only eight of the staff prompt and four of the student prompt responses to correspond. The lack of corresponding results and prompt alignment may be due to a variety of factors including respondent misunderstandings of prompt wording, lack of attention paid to the survey task, or design of the measurement tool.

With regard to the demographic data collected on each staff and student survey, neither students nor staff completed this portion of the survey. Based on my experience with student respondents, they indicated confusion when completing the demographic section, not knowing how to note their ethnicities. For staff respondents, several returned the surveys without this section complete. This may have been due to their lack of knowledge in this area, or failure to retrieve the information from the electronic student information system. Due to this lack of demographic data and the small sample size, I chose not to disaggregate by gender, ethnicity, or grade-level.

Finally, one other issue surfaced beyond the scope of the study. Just days after the end-of-program focus groups, the research site closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With constantly changing information, new state and federal guidelines, and procedures established in the district in which the research site was located, I resolved to take the data collected and proceed with my review, validation group and research associate meetings, and analysis. Because in-person meetings were no longer viable, these meetings took place online via Zoom. It is possible that the online nature of these meetings prevented participants from speaking freely due to the need to adhere to different meeting norms requiring raised hands and formal turn-

taking in the virtual setting. Despite these limitations and issues, findings suggest program highlights and growth opportunities, as well as lessons to guide future action research cycles.

### **Lessons Learned**

Findings from this action research study provide lessons not only for me as a researcher, but to the northern California-based nonprofit organization and its board, and other schools and community partners in their design and implementation of OST SEL programs to better meet the wellness needs of students and families. As the lead researcher, I learned about the power of action research, the positive changes it can affect, and the critical role of participants in providing essential information regarding their wants, needs, and growth. Data analysis specific to the OST SEL program provided guidance to the nonprofit organization in making modifications for greater effectiveness for current and future program participants. Finally, with data pointing to specific community-based actions, schools and other community partners can learn from these findings, collaborate, and more effectively design and implement programs that provide integrated and universal supports for student, classroom, school-site, district, family, and community wellness.

These lessons connect to the CDE's (2018a) Guiding Principles 4 and 5. Guiding Principle 4, Partner with Families and Communities, speaks to the actions identified in the study, and the need for universal SEL instruction, resources, and programs. Guiding Principle 5, Learn and Improve, relates to the need for ongoing action research cycles through which providers plan, act, observe, and reflect in order to best meet the wellness needs of their participants. In consideration of these lessons, identified actions for program improvement, and the theoretical framework of self-determination and basic psychological needs theories, it is possible to support children to become well and thriving individuals.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the inquiry stance of program improvement, this action research study focused on one northern California-based nonprofit organization and the development, modification, and refinement of its OST SEL programs for elementary school students. Findings from the current cycle show promise and suggest improvement in student self-management skills. At the same time, findings point to growth opportunities for future action research cycles directed at development of responsible decision-making skills, and the broader goal of building an integrated and universal platform for SEL instruction and resources to benefit children in classrooms, schools, families, and the larger community.

With the overall goal of mitigating the negative impact of ACEs and defining a new normal for mental health and wellness in children and families, the current action research cycle does not signify the end of the work, but rather a step in the process of designing and implementing more effective SEL programs to reach these goals. Using the findings from this study as a guide, future SEL work must not only include a focus on SEL competencies and CASEL's (2013) SAFE program features, but a more holistic and integrated focus on building universal SEL knowledge, understanding, and practices for all.

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## APPENDIX A: REFLEXIVE JOURNAL PROMPTS

During the first 5 minutes of each adult focus group, validation group, and critical friends group meeting, attendees will respond to several prompts designed to stimulate thinking about the action research project. Responses may be used to initiate dialogue and will be collected as part of study data.

1. List any questions you have about the study.

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2. List any concerns you have about the study.

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3. List any new ideas you would like to share.

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4. List any surprises you have experienced as part of the process.

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5. List anything new you have learned.

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## APPENDIX B: SOLICITATION FLYER

**ACTION RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!****Hoping to Make a Difference in  
Childhood Wellness?**

**Students, parent/guardians, school and district staff, family and community members** are invited to become part of an **Action Research** study focused on the [REDACTED] program and contribute to advancing wellness for elementary school students and families.

Informational Meeting  
Monday, January 13, 2020  
6:00 p.m. [REDACTED] Elementary School Library  
[REDACTED]

or contact [k\\_sarafian@u.pacific.edu](mailto:k_sarafian@u.pacific.edu)

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UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC



APPENDIX C: SOLICITATION EMAIL TO CURRENT AND PAST PROGRAM  
PARTICIPANTS

Dear [REDACTED] families,

I am writing to share a unique opportunity for you to participate in an action research study. I am seeking to enhance the [REDACTED] program for elementary school students and families.

Due to your child's and your own past participation in [REDACTED], your input is extremely valuable to the action research process.

If you, your child, and any other family members wish to become involved, your role will be one of action research participant. This means that you will work alongside other students, families, staff, community members, and me. Together we will determine actions and interventions that may lead to greater program effectiveness for current and future [REDACTED] participants.

You will be asked to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. You will share your feedback regarding program instruction and analyze program outcomes. You will also provide ideas to help improve the program. These ideas will be used during the second cycle of this research project. In this second cycle, we will implement suggested changes and determine their effectiveness.

Participation is voluntary. There is no financial compensation for your involvement. Some potential benefits to your child and family include increased instruction, awareness, and practice of social emotional skills and strategies. You will also gain the satisfaction of contributing to the research and program improvement.

I do hope you will contact me with questions or concerns you might have. Please also plan to attend the informational meeting on February 22 at 6:00 p.m. in the [REDACTED] library.

Regards,

Karen M. Sarafian  
Lead Researcher  
K\_sarafian@u.pacific.edu

## APPENDIX D: STUDENT VERBAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

(Utilized at informational meetings)

Thank you for coming to learn more about what I am doing at school. I have been learning more about education and how to help students. Now I am planning to study [REDACTED] and learn ways that we can make it even better. Our principals, their bosses, and my school/university have all given permission for us to work together.

I am asking you to help by working with me, other students, parents, adults at our school, and others who live here in [REDACTED]. I will ask you to answer questions on your own and in groups with other students so that we can find out ways to improve [REDACTED]. We will always work here at [REDACTED]. I will give your parent/s a calendar so that you do not need to worry about missing any meetings.

My school/university needs me to get permission from all the people that I am asking to work with. This is called informed consent. I am going to ask your parent/s to sign their permission. Then, I will ask you to sign your permission too.

After you talk to your parent/s, if you have any questions you can ask me or your parent/s can email me. Thank you, I cannot wait to hear all your great ideas.

## APPENDIX E: ADULT VERBAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

(Utilized at informational meetings)

Thank you for your attendance at this informational meeting about the action research study to be conducted here at [REDACTED]. The goal of this research is to examine the [REDACTED] out-of-school-time social emotional learning program and determine actions and interventions that will lead to greater program effectiveness. The research study has been approved by the University of the Pacific's Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED] Unified School District's office of research and evaluation, and the [REDACTED] administration.

I am inviting you to participate in the research by becoming an action research participant to work alongside other students, parent/guardians, site and district-level staff, and family and community members. Participation will take the form of surveys for students and teachers participating in the [REDACTED] program during the action research cycles, focus groups and interviews for students and adults who have been part of the [REDACTED] in the past, and those interested in supporting improvement goals. I will provide you with a meeting calendar, so that you can plan ahead for focus group and interview dates.

The university requires informed consent for any research using human subjects. To that extent, I will distribute informed consent forms to: (1) parent/guardians for minor participation, (2) staff members, and (3) parents/guardians, district support staff, community members. After parent/guardians provide minor consent, children will be read and asked to sign a Child Assent form.

Please carefully read the informed consent forms, ask any questions you might have, and sign your intent to participate. Should you have further questions, please contact me. Or you may contact my faculty advisors. Thank you, and I look forward to working with you.

## APPENDIX F: MINOR CONSENT FORM

IRB Approved 10/16/19  
Valid through 10/15/20



UNIVERSITY OF THE  
**PACIFIC**

**Benerd College of Education, University of the Pacific**  
**PERMISSION FOR RESEARCH SUBJECT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH:**  
**MINOR**

What's Next: Improving an Out-of-School-Time Social Emotional Learning Program  
for Elementary School Students

**DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH:**

Your child is invited to participate in a research study focused on the improvement of the \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ program implemented at  
\_\_\_\_\_ School in the \_\_\_\_\_.

The purpose of the study is to determine actions and interventions that may lead to greater program effectiveness for your child and future program participants. As an action research participant, your child will be asked to complete pre- and end-of-program surveys regarding his/her social emotional skills, written reflections, and engage in focus groups to contribute ideas and questions to be acted upon during the research cycle. For example, your child may be asked to respond to a survey question asking his/her tendency to ask for support from others or comfort level in standing up to bullies. Potential focus group questions may engage your child to suggest improvements to specific program features.

Your child will be asked to participate in video and audio taping for purposes of accurate data collection. Once video and audio recordings are transcribed and confirmed for accuracy, and at the completion of the study, all recordings will be destroyed.

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. The **maximum** expected time involvement for participation in this study will be 1-2 hours/week for 16 weeks outside of the school day except during the three weeks where students may attend \_\_\_\_\_ programming. In this case, student time commitment will extend to 3 hours and be reduced during the following week.

We do not anticipate any adverse impact to your child, but it is necessary that we inform you of potential risks associated with this study. While the study's focus is program improvement, uncomfortable feelings may arise through discussion or writing about SEL program components.

We cannot say your child will receive any direct benefit, but potential benefits include personal empowerment through the role of action research participant, connectedness through involvement on the action research team, contributions to a program that aims to better serve the school and larger community, and enhanced SEL through instruction and examination of targeted SEL skills. However, we cannot and do not guarantee that your child will receive any benefits.

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**Valid through 10/15/20**

Note: The study's principal investigator is a mandated reporter and is legally obligated to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to an appropriate law enforcement agency.

**PARTICIPATION:**

We expect to have a maximum of 150 participants take part in this study--including students, teachers/staff, site administrators, and family and community members.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will not affect your child's grades or participation in school, and will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which you or your child are otherwise entitled. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you are free to discontinue your child's participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you or your child are otherwise entitled.

**COLLECTION OF INFORMATION**

Names will be removed from any identifiable private information. Information collected will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

**PAYMENTS**

Your child will receive no payment for his/her participation.

**YOUR AND YOUR CHILD'S RIGHTS:**

If you have read this form and decided to allow your child to participate in this research project, please understand your child's participation is voluntary and your child has the right to withdraw his/her assent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled. You are also free to withdraw your consent to allow your child to participate in this research project at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits. Even if you give permission for your child to participate, the lead researcher or another member of the research team will speak with your child to confirm your child's assent to participate in the research study. Your child has the right to refuse to participate or answer particular questions.

We will take reasonable steps to keep confidential any information that is obtained in connection with this research study and that can be identified with your child. Each research participant will be assigned a unique identification code and data will be contained in password-protected electronic files. Furthermore, names will not be used in any reports and no material will correlate this consent form to the research data.

Upon conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked or otherwise secured location and will be destroyed after a period of three years from the date the research is completed.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Questions, Concerns, or Complaints: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this **research study**, its procedures, risks and benefits, you should ask the Lead Researcher or Faculty Advisor:

**Name of Lead Researcher:** Karen M. Sarafian, \_\_\_\_\_, k\_sarafian@u.pacific.edu

**IRB Approved 10/16/19**  
**Valid through 10/15/20**

**Names of Faculty Advisors:** Dr. Robert Calvert, \_\_\_\_\_ and Dr. Laura Hallberg, \_\_\_\_\_

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your child's rights as a participant, please contact the University of the Pacific, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs to speak to someone independent of the research team at 209-946-3903 or [IRB@pacific.edu](mailto:IRB@pacific.edu).

#### **DISMISSAL FROM STUDY**

It is possible that we may decide that your child's participation in this research is not appropriate. In the case that his/her behavior is disruptive to the study process, your child will be dismissed from the study. In any event, we appreciate your willingness to allow your child to participate in this research.

#### **ADDITIONAL COSTS TO SUBJECT**

There is no cost to you for your child to participate in this study.

#### **DISCLOSURE OF ANY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

This study is a requirement for fulfillment of a doctorate in education. Additionally, it may influence the work of The Sarafian Foundation, a family non-profit of which the researcher is cofounder. The researcher earns no money or other incentives from The Sarafian Foundation or its partners.

#### **NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS**

As an action research participant, your child will be included in the data collection, analysis, and findings of this action research study.

I hereby consent for my child: (Indicate **Yes** or **No**)

- To be [audio/video] recorded during this study.  
☐ Yes ☐ No
- For such [audio/video] records resulting from this study to be used for transcription and validation of accuracy.  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered, any questions that you may have, that you completely volunteer to permit your child to participate in the research study (if your child assents to such participation), that you understand that your child may withdraw his/her assent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Child (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature(s) of Parent(s), Guardian or Authorized Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed Name of Parent(s), Guardian or Authorized Representative

**The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep**

## APPENDIX G: CHILD ASSENT FORM



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**PACIFIC**

**IRB Approved 10/16/19**  
**Valid through 10/15/20**

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**Child Assent Letter**

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I want to improve [REDACTED] for students and families like yours. I am asking if you want to help.

If you decide you want to help, I will ask you to complete two short surveys before you start [REDACTED]. I will also ask you to complete two more short surveys when you finish. The surveys will take a few minutes each.

I will also ask if you want to come to after-school meetings where you will talk about [REDACTED]. I want you to give ideas to keep improving. Each meeting will last 45 minutes and will take place after school.

You do not have to complete the surveys or come to meetings if you do not want to. Or, if you don't want to answer all questions, you don't have to. You can also stop working with me at any time. You just need to say so. It is not a problem.

If you have any questions, just ask. If you can't decide whether to do it or not, just ask if you want anything explained.

If you do want to try it, please sign your name. Your parent(s) have already told me that it is alright with them. Remember, you don't have to, and once you start you can stop whenever you like.

---

(student signature)

(date)

## APPENDIX H: ADULT CONSENT FORM

IRB Approved 10/16/19  
Valid through 10/15/20



UNIVERSITY OF THE  
**PACIFIC**

*Benerd College of Education*

**RESEARCH SUBJECT'S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH:  
PARENT/GUARDIAN, DISTRICT SUPPORT STAFF, COMMUNITY MEMBER**

What's Next: Improving an Out-of-School-Time Social Emotional Learning Program for  
Elementary School Students

Name of Lead Researcher: Karen M. Sarafian

Name of Faculty Advisors: Dr. Robert Calvert and Dr. Laura Hallberg

Your consent is being sought to participate in a research study, and your participation is entirely voluntary.

**A. Purpose of Research.**

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the \_\_\_\_\_ out-of-school-time (OST) program designed to teach social emotional learning (SEL) competencies, and to determine actions and interventions that may lead to greater program effectiveness for current and future program participants.

**B. Duration of Participation.**

The **maximum** expected time involvement for participation in this study will be 1-2 hours/week for 16 weeks. Research events will take place outside of contracted school hours.

**C. Research Procedures.**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in focus groups during which you will be asked to contribute ideas and questions to be acted upon during each of the two research cycles.

For purposes of accurate data collection, you will be asked to participate in video and audio taping. Once video and audio recordings are transcribed and confirmed for accuracy, and at the completion of the study, all recordings will be destroyed.

**D. Foreseeable Risks.**

We do not anticipate any adverse impact related to your participation, but it is necessary that we inform you of potential risks associated with this study. While the focus is program improvement, uncomfortable feelings or experiences may arise through discussion of SEL program components.

Note: The study's principal investigator is a mandated reporter and is legally obligated to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to an appropriate law enforcement agency.

**E. Benefits.**



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**Valid through 10/15/20**

There are several potential benefits as a result of participating in this research. These include personal empowerment through your role as an action research participant, connectedness through involvement on the action research team, contributions to a program that aims to better serve the school and larger community, and enhancement of family and community SEL through instruction and examination of defined SEL skills. However, we cannot and do not guarantee that you will receive any benefits.

## **I. CONFIDENTIALITY**

We will take reasonable steps to keep confidential any information that is obtained in connection with this research study and that can be identified with you.

Measures to protect your confidentiality include: your name will not be included in any reports, records will be kept in secured locations, the number of researchers or persons with access to the records will be limited to the extent reasonable, records will be reasonably de-identified, and no/limited material will correlate the consent form to the research data.

Upon conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked or otherwise secured location and will be destroyed three years after the research is completed.

## **II. PARTICIPATION**

You were invited as a possible participant in this study because of your role as:

- a parent/guardian of a student who currently or previously attended the \_\_\_\_\_ program;
- a parent/guardian of a student who currently or previously attended an \_\_\_\_\_ school;
- a student support provider in the \_\_\_\_\_ School District;
- an \_\_\_\_\_ community member;
- a mental health provider or local non-profit leader focused on child wellness

We expect to have 150 participants take part in this study. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

## **III. COLLECTION OF INFORMATION**

Names will be removed from any identifiable private information. Information collected will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

## **IV. UNIVERSITY CONTACT INFORMATION**

I am the lead researcher in this study and I am a doctoral student at the University of the Pacific, Benerd College of Education. This research is being conducted as part of fulfillment of a Doctorate in Education.

**IRB Approved 10/16/19**  
**Valid through 10/15/20**

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at \_\_\_\_\_ or by email at k\_sarafian@u.pacific.edu, or my dissertation chair, Dr. Robert Calvert by email at \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or wish to speak with an independent contact, please contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific at (209) 946-3903 or by email at [IRB@u.pacific.edu](mailto:IRB@u.pacific.edu).

#### **V. COMPENSATION & COMMERCIAL PROFIT**

No compensation is being offered for participation in this study.

#### **VI. ADDITIONAL COSTS TO SUBJECT**

There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

#### **VII. DISCLOSURE OF ANY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

This study is a requirement for fulfillment of a doctorate in education. Additionally, it may influence the work of The Sarafian Foundation, a family non-profit of which the researcher is cofounder. The researcher earns no money or other incentives from The Sarafian Foundation or its partners.

#### **VIII. NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS**

As an action research participant, you will be included in the data collection, analysis, and findings of this action research study.

#### **IX. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND SIGNATURE**

I hereby consent: (Indicate *Yes* or *No*)

- To be [audio/video] recorded during this study.  
     \_\_\_Yes\_\_\_No
- For such [audio/video] records resulting from this study to be used for data analysis:  
     \_\_\_Yes\_\_\_No

**You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.**

**Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered, any questions that you may have, that your participation is completely voluntary, that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.**

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Study Participant (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Who Obtained Consent (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX I: STAFF CONSENT FORM

IRB Approved 10/16/19  
Valid through 10/15/20



UNIVERSITY OF THE  
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*Benerd College of Education*  
**RESEARCH SUBJECT'S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH:  
SCHOOL STAFF**

What's Next: Improving an Out-of-School-Time Social Emotional Learning Program for  
Elementary School Students

Name of Lead Researcher: Karen M. Sarafian

Name of Faculty Advisors: Dr. Robert Calvert and Dr. Laura Hallberg

Your consent is being sought to participate in a research study, and your participation is entirely voluntary.

**A. Purpose of Research.**

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the \_\_\_\_\_ out-of-school-time (OST) program designed to teach social emotional learning (SEL) competencies, and to determine actions and interventions that may lead to greater program effectiveness for current and future program participants.

**B. Duration of Participation.**

The **maximum** expected time involvement for participation in this study will be 1-2 hours/week for 16 weeks. Research events will take place outside of contracted school hours.

**C. Research Procedures.**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in focus groups and respond to surveys. During focus groups, you will be asked to contribute ideas and questions to be acted upon in each research cycle. Survey responses will focus on student social emotional skills.

For purposes of accurate data collection, you will be asked to participate in video and audio taping. Once video and audio recordings are transcribed and confirmed for accuracy, and at the completion of the study, all recordings will be destroyed.

**D. Foreseeable Risks.**

We do not anticipate any adverse impact related to your participation, but it is necessary that we inform you of potential risks associated with this study. While the focus is program improvement, uncomfortable feelings or experiences may arise through discussion of SEL program components.

Note: The study's principal investigator is a mandated reporter and is legally obligated to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to an appropriate law enforcement agency.

**IRB Approved 10/16/19**  
**Valid through 10/15/20**

#### **E. Benefits.**

There are several potential benefits as a result of participating in this research. These include personal empowerment through your role as an action research participant, connectedness through involvement on the action research team, contributions to a program that aims to better serve the school and larger community, professional development in the enhancement of SEL through instruction and examination of defined SEL skills. However, we cannot and do not guarantee that you will receive any benefits.

#### **I. CONFIDENTIALITY**

We will take reasonable steps to keep confidential any information that is obtained in connection with this research study and that can be identified with you.

Measures to protect your confidentiality include: your name will not be included in any reports, records will be kept in secured locations, the number of researchers or persons with access to the records will be limited to the extent reasonable, records will be reasonably de-identified, and no/limited material will correlate the consent form to the research data.

Upon conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked or otherwise secured location and will be destroyed three years after the research is completed.

#### **II. PARTICIPATION**

You were invited as a possible participant in this study because of your role as an elementary school teacher/staff member, or administrator in the \_\_\_\_\_ School District.

We expect to have 150 participants take part in this study. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

#### **III. COLLECTION OF INFORMATION**

Names will be removed from any identifiable private information. Information collected will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

#### **IV. UNIVERSITY CONTACT INFORMATION**

I am the lead researcher in this study and I am a doctoral student at the University of the Pacific, Benerd College of Education. This research is being conducted as part of fulfillment of a Doctorate in Education.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at \_\_\_\_\_ or by email at [k\\_sarafian@u.pacific.edu](mailto:k_sarafian@u.pacific.edu), or my dissertation chair, Dr. Robert Calvert by email at \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or wish to speak with an independent contact, please contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific at (209) 946-3903 or by email at [IRB@pacific.edu](mailto:IRB@pacific.edu).

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**Valid through 10/15/20**

#### **V. COMPENSATION & COMMERCIAL PROFIT**

No compensation is being offered for participation in this study.

#### **VI. ADDITIONAL COSTS TO SUBJECT**

There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

#### **VII. DISCLOSURE OF ANY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

This study is a requirement for fulfillment of a doctorate in education. Additionally, it may influence the work of The Sarafian Foundation, a family non-profit of which the researcher is cofounder. The researcher earns no money or other incentives from The Sarafian Foundation or its partners.

#### **VIII. NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS**

As an action research participant, you will be included in the data collection, analysis, and findings of this action research study.

#### **IX. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND SIGNATURE**

I hereby consent: (Indicate **Yes** or **No**)

- To be [*audio/video*] recorded during this study.  
☐ Yes ☐ No
- For such [*audio/video*] records resulting from this study to be used for data analysis:  
☐ Yes ☐ No

**You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.**

**Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered, any questions that you may have, that your participation is completely voluntary, that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.**

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Study Participant (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Who Obtained Consent (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX J: RESEARCH ASSOCIATE MEETING PROTOCOL

Research associate meetings are designed for group members to critically reflect on the research process, data collection, and engage in open and honest dialogue as the study progresses. Meeting minutes will be recorded and authenticated by all team members. Each meeting agenda will focus on some or all of the following steps:

- I. Welcome
- II. Progress Report
- III. Critical reflection
  - a. Discuss any issues related to researcher positionality.
  - b. Discuss any issues related to ethics or trustworthiness.
- IV. Work time (data to be used will be aggregated and not individually identifiable)
  - a. Code and categorize focus group and interview data for themes.
  - b. Examine current survey data and look for statistical trends
- V. Inquiry
  - a. What does the current focus group data show?
  - b. What does the current survey data show?
  - c. Are there any conclusions that can be made based on the data?
  - d. What, if anything, is surprising about the data?
  - e. What more do we want to know?
  - f. What, if any, successes or problems have we encountered?
  - g. What are some possible changes can we make in the next iteration?
  - h. What new information exists that can impact our work?
- VI. Additional thoughts for consideration
- VII. Thank you and closing

## APPENDIX K: VALIDATION GROUP MEETING PROTOCOL

Validation group meetings are designed for group members to raise questions and provide critical reflection on the research process, ask for evidence and provide formative evaluation. Meeting minutes will be recorded and authenticated by all team members. Each meeting agenda will include the following topics:

- I. Welcome
- II. Presentation of the study's purpose and inquiry stance
- III. Progress report
- IV. Data and evidence
- V. General findings and provisional conclusions
- VI. Ethical considerations
- VII. Validity
- VIII. Additional questions or considerations
- IX. Thank you and closing remarks

## APPENDIX L: PRE-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 1

**PRE-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 1****Full Name:** \_\_\_\_\_**Circle the grade level in which you are currently enrolled:**      3<sup>rd</sup>      4<sup>th</sup>      5<sup>th</sup>**Circle your gender:**      Male      Female      Non-Binary      Decline to State**Circle your ethnicity:**

Hispanic    Black/African American    Native American/American Indian    Asian Pacific Islander  
 Caucasian/White/European American    Middle Eastern    2 or more ethnicities    Decline to State

**Please complete the survey by reading each statement and placing an “X” under the category that best represents your thoughts and actions.**

Statement	Always True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
1. I know when others are happy or sad.			
2. I can calm myself when I’m angry or upset.			
3. I know what I am good at.			
4. I share my feelings.			
5. I think carefully before making decisions.			
6. I ask for help when I have a problem.			
7. It’s easy for me to listen and talk to others.			
8. I stand up for myself by saying and doing what I believe.			
9. I find it difficult to have conversations with others.			
10. It’s hard to control myself when I’m upset or angry.			
11. I quickly make decisions and don’t spend too much time thinking about them.			
12. I’m not sure what I am good at.			
13. I keep feelings to myself.			
14. I follow what my friends say to do.			
15. I’d rather solve a problem on my own than ask for help.			
16. It’s hard to understand how other people feel.			



## APPENDIX M: END-OF-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 1

**END-OF-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 1****Full Name:** \_\_\_\_\_**Circle the grade level in which you are currently enrolled:**      3<sup>rd</sup>      4<sup>th</sup>      5<sup>th</sup>**Circle your gender:**      Male      Female      Non-Binary      Decline to State**Circle your ethnicity:**

Hispanic    Black/African American    Native American/American Indian    Asian Pacific Islander  
 Caucasian/White/European American    Middle Eastern    2 or more ethnicities    Decline to State

**Please complete the survey by reading each statement and placing an “X” under the category that best represents your thoughts and actions.**

Statement	Always True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
1. I know when others are happy or sad.			
2. I can calm myself when I'm angry or upset.			
3. I know what I am good at.			
4. I share my feelings.			
5. I think carefully before making decisions.			
6. I ask for help when I have a problem.			
7. It's easy for me to listen and talk to others.			
8. I stand up for myself by saying and doing what I believe.			
9. I find it difficult to have conversations with others.			
10. It's hard to control myself when I'm upset or angry.			
11. I quickly make decisions and don't spend too much time thinking about them.			
12. I'm not sure what I am good at.			
13. I keep feelings to myself.			
14. I follow what my friends say to do.			
15. I'd rather solve a problem on my own than ask for help.			
16. It's hard to understand how other people feel.			

APPENDIX N: PRE-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 2

PRE-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 2

Full Name:

Circle the grade level in which you are currently enrolled:

3rd

4th

5th

Circle your gender:

Male

Female

Non-Binary

Decline to State

Circle your ethnicity:

Hispanic

Black/African American

Native American/American Indian

Asian Pacific Islander

Caucasian/White/European American

Middle Eastern

2 or more ethnicities

Decline to State

Please complete the survey by reading each question and ranking it by placing an “X” under the category where you think it belongs.

Question	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
1. How important is it to be able to understand how others feel?			
2. How important is it to be able to calm oneself when angry or upset?			
3. How important is it to be able to know what you are good at?			
4. How important is it to be able to share your feelings with others?			
5. How important is it to think carefully before making decisions?			
6. How important is it to ask for help when you have a problem?			
7. How important is it to be able to listen and talk to others?			
8. How important is it to be able to stand up for yourself by saying and doing what you believe?			

APPENDIX O: END-OF-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 2

END-OF-PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY 2

Full Name:

Circle the grade level in which you are currently enrolled:

3rd

4th

5th

Circle your gender:

Male

Female

Non-Binary

Decline to State

Circle your ethnicity:

Hispanic

Black/African American

Native American/American Indian

Asian Pacific Islander

Caucasian/White/European American

Middle Eastern

2 or more ethnicities

Decline to State

Please complete the survey by reading each question and ranking it by placing an “X” under the category where you think it belongs.

Question	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
1. How important is it to be able to understand how others feel?			
2. How important is it to be able to calm oneself when angry or upset?			
3. How important is it to be able to know what you are good at?			
4. How important is it to be able to share your feelings with others?			
5. How important is it to think carefully before making decisions?			
6. How important is it to ask for help when you have a problem?			
7. How important is it to be able to listen and talk to others?			
8. How important is it to be able to stand up for yourself by saying and doing what you believe?			

## APPENDIX P: PRE-PROGRAM STAFF SURVEY

## PRE-PROGRAM STAFF SURVEY

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the grade level in which student is currently enrolled: 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup>

Circle your gender: Male Female Non-Binary Decline to State

Circle your ethnicity:

Hispanic Black/African American Native American/American Indian Asian Pacific Islander  
 Caucasian/White/European American Middle Eastern 2 or more ethnicities Decline to State

Please complete the survey by placing an “X” for each statement that best represents your observations of the behaviors and actions of this student.

Statement	Always True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
1. This student makes decisions without considering pros and cons.			
2. This student can calm him/herself when angry or upset.			
3. This student follows what his/her friends say to do.			
4. This student shares his/her feelings with others.			
5. This student thinks carefully before making decisions.			
6. This student seeks support from others.			
7. This student communicates easily with peers and adults.			
8. This student stands up for him/herself.			
9. This student has difficulty communicating with others.			
10. This student has difficulty controlling him/herself when angry or upset.			
11. This student recognizes when others are happy or sad.			
12. This student does not recognize his/her strengths.			
13. This student keeps feelings to him/herself.			
14. This student knows his/her own strengths.			
15. This student has difficulty seeking support.			
16. This student has difficulty understanding how others feel.			

## APPENDIX Q: END-OF-PROGRAM STAFF SURVEY

## END-OF-PROGRAM STAFF SURVEY

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the grade level in which student is currently enrolled: 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup>

Circle your gender: Male Female Non-Binary Decline to State

Circle your ethnicity:

Hispanic Black/African American Native American/American Indian Asian Pacific Islander  
 Caucasian/White/European American Middle Eastern 2 or more ethnicities Decline to State

Please complete the survey by placing an "X" for each statement that best represents your observations of the behaviors and actions of this student.

Statement	Always True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
1. This student makes decisions without considering pros and cons.			
2. This student can calm him/herself when angry or upset.			
3. This student follows what his/her friends say to do.			
4. This student shares his/her feelings with others.			
5. This student thinks carefully before making decisions.			
6. This student seeks support from others.			
7. This student communicates easily with peers and adults.			
8. This student stands up for him/herself.			
9. This student has difficulty communicating with others.			
10. This student has difficulty controlling him/herself when angry or upset.			
11. This student recognizes when others are happy or sad.			
12. This student does not recognize his/her strengths.			
13. This student keeps feelings to him/herself.			
14. This student knows his/her own strengths.			
15. This student has difficulty seeking support.			
16. This student has difficulty understanding how others feel.			

## APPENDIX R: ADULT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Hi, my name is Karen Sarafian. As you know, I have taught at [REDACTED] for many years and am currently pursuing my doctorate at University of the Pacific. This action research study focuses on the [REDACTED] out-of-school-time social emotional learning program implemented by [REDACTED]. As you know from the informed consent process, your participation in this action research study is completely voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential. In addition, you may opt out of answering specific questions or withdraw at any time. Today we will be talking about the current action research cycle. Do you agree to participate in this focus group today? Do you have any questions? May I have your permission to record our meeting for my future reference?

\*\*\*Note: Focus group questions changed based on the cyclical action research process. Questions listed here, however, remained the same throughout.

To get started, let's spend 5 minutes responding to our reflexive journal prompts. Please think carefully about your responses to set the tone for our focus group conversation. (When 5 minutes have passed, participants will engage in the focus group and be invited to share thoughts journaled. Following the sharing of reflexive journals, the participants will be engaged in the focus group questions below.).

Now let's move on remind the group of your name and relation to the [REDACTED] program.

Questions related to **social emotional learning skills**: Now, let's get to the heart of the matter.

1. Discuss what you think student participants know about self-awareness or understanding themselves. Examples?
2. Discuss what you think student participants know about social-awareness or understanding what others are thinking and feeling. Examples?
3. Discuss what you think student participants know about self-management or controlling their feelings and actions—such as when they are angry or upset. Examples?
4. Discuss what you think student participants know about relationship skills or interacting with others—such as cooperating or communicating. Examples?
5. Discuss what you think student participants know about responsible decision-making. Examples?

Questions related to **program implementation**: Now let's talk about the program.

1. What are strengths of the program?
2. What are challenges of the program?

Questions related to **experiences or observations** of the program: Now let's talk about your experiences or observations about the program.

1. Discuss a positive experience you had with the program.
2. Discuss a negative experience you had with the program.
3. What is one thing you have observed about the impact of this program on those involved?

Questions related to overall **program outcomes**: OK, let's finish up by talking about how you might change the program.

1. The program currently focuses on teaching and practicing social emotional skills such as understanding yourself, developing empathy, managing emotions and behavior, interacting with others, goal-setting and responsible decision-making. Knowing this, what would you add to the program? Why?
2. What would you remove from the program? Why?
3. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to add?

Thank you for engaging in this focus group today. If you have any questions between now and our next meeting, please contact me.

Potential probes for facilitator:

1. Tell me more.
2. What does that look like?
3. How do you feel about that?
4. Why do you say that?

## APPENDIX S: STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Hi, my name is Ms. Sarafian. As you know, I have taught at [REDACTED] for many years. Now I am working on becoming a Doctor of Education. I am trying to keep improving [REDACTED]. I want to remind you that you have volunteered to help, and that everything you say will be kept private. You also do not have to answer all questions and you can drop out at any time. Today we will be talking about your experiences with [REDACTED]. I will also ask you for any ideas you have for making it better. Do you agree to participate? Do you have any questions? May I have your permission to record our meeting so I can listen to it again later?

\*Note: Focus group questions changed based on the cyclical action research process. Questions 1-10, however, remained the same throughout.

To get started, let's remind the group of your name and relation to the [REDACTED] program.

Questions related to **social emotional learning skills**: Now, let's get started.

1. Talk about what you know about self-awareness, meaning understanding yourself. Examples?
2. Talk about what you know about social-awareness, meaning understanding others. Examples?
3. Talk about what you know about self-management, meaning controlling your feelings and actions. Examples?
4. Talk about what you know about relationship skills, meaning being with others. Examples?
5. Talk about what you know about responsible decision-making. Examples?

Questions related to **program implementation**: Now let's talk about the program.

1. What is good about the program?
2. What is not good about the program?

Questions related to **experiences or observations** of the program: Now let's talk about your experiences or observations about the program.

1. Talk about a good experience you had with the program.
2. Talk about a bad experience you had with the program.

Questions related to overall **program outcomes**: OK, let's finish up by talking about how you might change the program.

1. Thinking about all the things we did, what would you add to the program? Why?
2. Thinking about all the things we did, what would you take out of the program? Why?
3. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to add?

Thank you for meeting today. If you have any questions between now and our next meeting, please ask me or have your parent/guardian ask me.

Potential probes for facilitator:

1. Tell me more.



2. What does that look like?
3. How do you feel about that?
4. Why do you say that?

## APPENDIX T: MANDATED REPORTER INFORMATION

**Obligations of Mandated Reporters:**

A list of persons whose profession qualifies them as “mandated reporters” of child abuse or neglect is found in California Penal Code Section 11165.7. The list is extensive and continues to grow. It includes all school/district employees, administrators, and athletic coaches. All persons hired into positions included on the list of mandated reporters are required, upon employment, to be provided with a statement, informing them that they are a mandated reporter and their obligations to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect pursuant to California Penal Code Section 11166.5.

All persons who are mandated reporters are required, by law, to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. It is not the job of the mandated reporter to determine whether the allegations are valid. If child abuse or neglect is reasonably suspected or if a pupil shares information with a mandated reporter leading him/her to believe abuse or neglect has taken place, the report must be made. No supervisor or administrator can impede or inhibit a report or subject the reporting person to any sanction.

To make a report, an employee must contact an appropriate local law enforcement or county child welfare agency, listed below. This legal obligation is not satisfied by making a report of the incident to a supervisor or to the school. An appropriate law enforcement agency may be one of the following:

- A Police or Sheriff’s Department (not including a school district police department or school security department).
- A County Probation Department, if designated by the county to receive child abuse reports.
- A County Welfare Department/County Child Protective Services.

The report should be made immediately over the telephone and should be followed up in writing. The law enforcement agency has special forms for this purpose that they will ask you to complete. If a report cannot be made immediately over the telephone, then an initial report may be made via e-mail or fax. A report may also be filed at the same time with your school district or county office of education (COE). School districts and COEs, however, do not investigate child abuse allegations, nor do they attempt to contact the person suspected of child abuse or neglect.

School districts and COEs may have additional policies adopted at the local level relating to the duties of mandated reporters. School staff should consult with their district to determine if there are additional steps that must be taken.

These policies do not take the place of reporting to an appropriate local law enforcement or county child welfare agency.

Source: California Department of Education, 2019, paras. 12-17.